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IN THIS ISSUE

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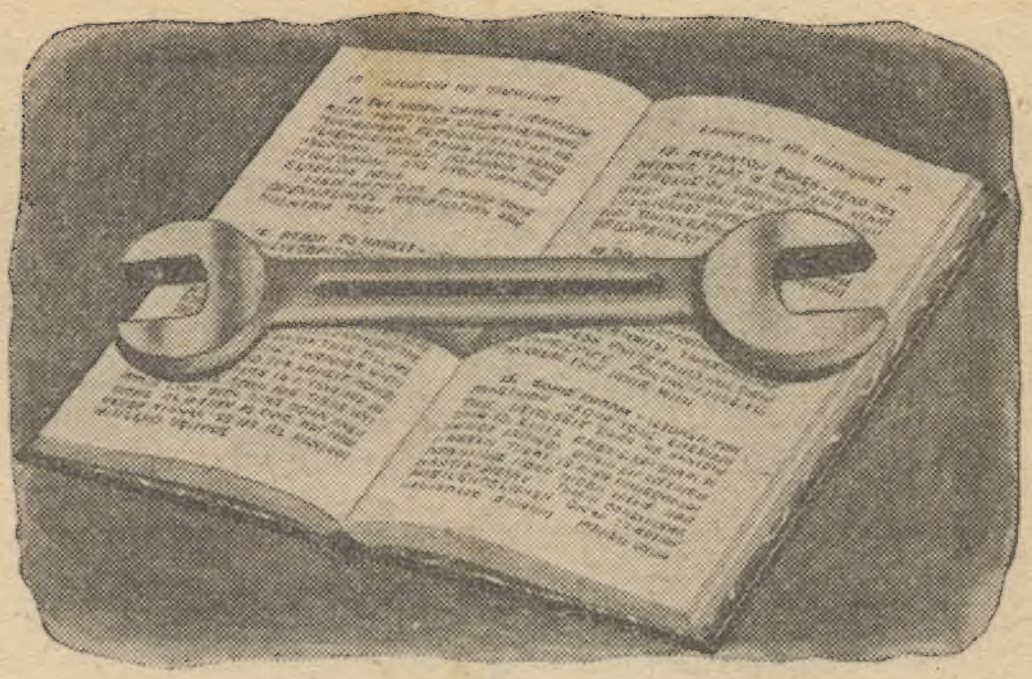

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REAL WESTERN

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Volume 14 **December, 1948** **Number 3**

COMPLETE NEW BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

LAW AND ORDER - LIMITED

By T. W. Ford 6

If you can't smash them, join them!" has been Stach Speyer's motto, and now that the forces of law were approaching Succara, he knew the time was right to pull a quick switch. He wouldn't wait for the Vigilantes to run him out, and hang him; he'd take over the clean-up job himself — at a profit, of course!

Short Stories

MAN OF PEACE ..... **By C. C. Staples** **63**

If someone didn't side old Will Rains, it would be a simple case of murder. And everyone figured that that someone ought to be Tom Packard!

THAT WASH CREEK HELLER ..... **By Cliff Campbell** **69**

Big Dan Bailey was a tough customer, but his daughter Peggy was tougher!

SATAN BAITS A DEATH TRAP ..... **By Dan Kirby and A. Kenneth Brent** **81**

Was it true that Hereford cow-stock was uanble to take care of itself out on the range? Or was there another reason for Wade Ramage's losses?

CALL OF THE CARDS ..... **By Rex Whitechurch** **94**

Jack Gorman was sure that the pasteboards would never let him down!

ROBERT W. LOWNDES, Editor

REAL WESTERN published every other month by COLUMBIA PUBLICATIONS, INC. 1 Appleton Street, Holyoke, Mass. Editorial and executive offices at 241 Church Street, N. Y. 13, N. Y. Entered as second class matter at the Post Office at Holyoke, Mass.

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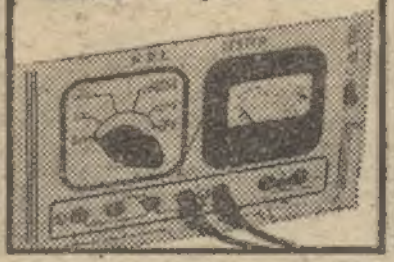

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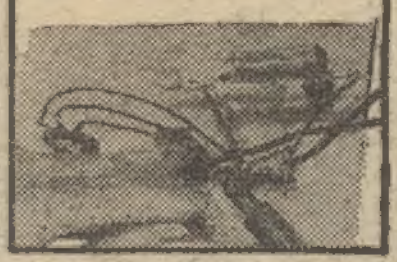

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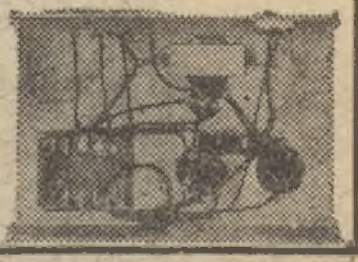

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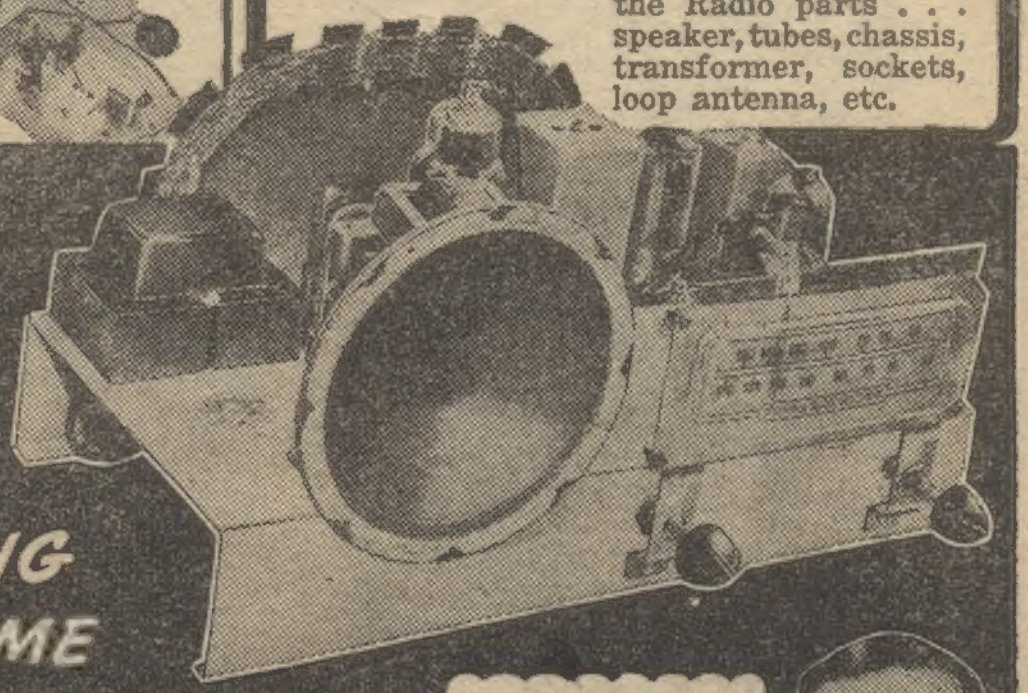

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Red Cully and the girl saw they were encircled.

A Brand New Book-Length Novel Complete In This Issue

Stach Speyer could see how the wind was blowing; he knew that Succara was ripe for Vigilante Law, and that his free-booting days were numbered. But there was one chance for him, if he organized his own

Law And Order-Limited!

By T. W Ford

(Author of "The Wild One")

1

RED CULLY had simply been craving a snatch of shuteye badly; he hadn't planned to wake up and find himself condemned to die, to be gunned down like a cur dog because somebody had talked, unaware of his presence. He'd hit into this little creek-crossing settlement on a crowbait for which he'd swapped a horse he'd stolen. Almost dead broke; powdered with trail dust from head to foot and haggered with fatigue. After all, when you've been riding from a posse for four and a half days, it makes you bone-weary between the strain and saddle-soreness. But he'd finally doubled and thrown them off, hit this little pue-

blo. With the silver he had in his pocket, it was a toss-up between a few mouthfuls of grub and a couple of drinks; he'd figured the drinks would do him more good.

He'd had two in this small honky tonk early in the evening. So tired he could barely stand at the bar; consumed by an overpowering desire to sleep, to sleep under a roof, in some safe place, without keeping an ear cocked for a step in the grass, the distant *cloppity-clop* of the horses of pursuers. And when there'd been a ruckus between one of the brassy-haired hostesses and an orey-eyed gent, attracting everybody's attention, his instinct had told him this was his opportunity. He'd strayed down a back hall, found an unlocked door, a room with a cot in the corner. He'd dropped onto it.

He started to doze, but sound sleep wouldn't come. The wariness of the hunted thing wouldn't let him slumber. Not in the open, in plain sight like that, anyway. If somebody came in, they'd have him. And then there might be embarrassing questions; he as a stranger here, to begin with. He got up, pulled off the blanket, then wrapped himself in it as he crawled under the cot.

When he wakened, he smelled cigar smoke. Maybe it was the odor of it that had roused him. Cigar smoke meant men nearby, and he'd learned to fear men in the last few days. He lay there, propping open his heavy eyelids, peering out of sunken pupils. There was lamplight in the room now, and three pair of boots under the table out there in the middle of the room. The owners of them were talking.

"Close down the Big Ten?" the one with the thin voice was saying. "Stach Speyer, I think you've gone locoed. Why, by grab, I—"

"I can see which way the wind is a-blowing," said the one with the custom-made, highly-shined Justins. "Stach Speyer goes locoed when all the wells in the world go dry. And that ain't happened—yet! Ain't liable, neither." He had a deep voice, a voice habitually thick and lazy too.

By edging his head forward beneath the cot a little, Red Cully could see him with one eye, this Speyer. He was a huge man, heavy-bodied with the overweight of a man who did no physical work. Yet there was a sense of power about the form garbed in fawn-colored trousers with a loose black coat above them. He was heavy-faced with a certain genial look above a heavy black mustache. Cully knew at once it was a mask the man wore; he'd look the same way if he had to shoot down a man in cold blood. And he was capable, this Speyer, of doing just that; he was a strong man who'd be held back by no weak things.

SPEYER WENT on speaking. "I can see how the wind blows. It's an old motto of mine: Never buck the tide." He blew out cigaret smoke.

The third man spoke. He was long, slablike, sitting astride a chair, hands gripping the back of it before him. The tips of his holsters were thronged down around his thighs. Cully could see his profile, sharp as a hatchet with a long spiked nose. The cold-blooded stamp of the gunman was all over him. He said:

"Look, boss. What's the game? I don't sabe it. Phillips the town marshal gets shot down, killed, when he's out on duty. Sure, I know, he got gunned in the back." The slablike man had a grating voice like gravel being rubbed together. "But what's it to you? By garb, we never been on the side of law and order afore. Yet here you are down here, a-tracking the gents what might have done it. Now you're waiting for a tip on 'em. Honest, I don't get it."

The big man, Stach Speyer, said bluntly, "Willkins, I ain't used to explaining myself to anybody—specially when I pay 'em fancy wages because they're real spry at shucking a gun barrel from a holster."

Willkins said quickly, "All right,

boss. Only I like to understand things. Me, I gotta look out for myself; and I don't understand running with the Law. I done some running *from* it in my time."

Speyer chuckled. "I know, Willy. You'll be safe. I ain't reformed; it's only going to look like I'm backing the law. All on the surface. See? I'm not only down here because I got a tip on the marshal's killers; it *was* the Barron brothers. I'm danged certain. I even picked up the marshal's own badge. Look at it." He brought it out of a side pocket of his black coat.

Willkins whistled sharply in surprise. "I'll be danged."

The third man with the thin-emotion-drained voice began to talk again. "I don't understand your game yet, Stach. You got the Big Ten, the top gambling hall in Succara. It's a gold mine. After all, I run the bank so I know about what you deposit."

"Ridger," said Stach Speyer, "the days of places like the Big Ten in Succara are done—for quite a spell, leastwise. Times are changing. So—"

Ridger the banker cut in impatiently. "Sure times change. But a man don't throw away a gold lode; dinero always runs the world, Stach. I know the Big Ten's got a rough reputation." He chuckled without mirth. "You don't get nowhere in business dealing with the kid gloves on. Plenty of gents have claimed they got cold-decked in your joint; they's been shootings when a loser gits himself primed with forty rod whisky and suspicions. But, shucks, they's always talk about things like that where cards is played for high stakes. You're too strong for anybody to buck you and make real trouble, and you're a danged good client of the bank's. So why—"

FROM UNDER the cot, Red Cully could see the banker was a pot-bellied man, bald, with the cold eyes in pouches of sallow flesh peering out at the world through spectacles. He was as pale faced as if he'd crept out from under a rock, double chinned.

"Why—because I can read the handwriting on the wall, Ridger," Stach Speyer said. He slid a hand under his coat to finger a double-barrelled derringer in a specially contrived pocket inside. It was one of the weapons Speyer always had secreted about his person. Just the way, as some folks told in soft whispers, he was alleged to keep cards hidden about him for use in an emergency.

"Succara is boiling mad over the killing of Phillips; folks are demanding action. That new bunch of Vigilantes have grown stronger every week. More and more men joining up with 'em. People are belly-sick of all the violence and bloodshed; they're yelling for an end to all the gunplay we used to take for granted in Succara."

The cornered, watching Red Cully saw the banker, Ridger, nod. "Sure, sure. Reform wave's coming in. But those things always blow over; all you got to do is pull in your horns a mite, sing soft, and wait."

"No!" Speyer snapped a match on his thumbnail and put it to the quirly he'd rolled, blew grayish smoke throuh the cloud of cigar smoke drifting from the banker. "This is plump serious. The Vigialntes have got the financial backing of some of the big potatoes in town. Ridger, they mean to clean up Succara: and me, Stach Speyer, I plan to beat 'em to it! That's all."

"What?" said Ridger and Willkins together, shocked.

"That's it, by grab. Exactly it, gents." Speyer's heavy hand, open, smacked the table with a crack like a gunshot. "I've joined the law and order crowd—'cause that's what's coming. It's inevitable; and when you can't whip something, join it. That's why I plan to close down the Big Ten."

The other two simply sat in silence. From under the cot, Red Cully could see Ridger blinking behind his glasses, blinking in disbelief.

Speyer chuckled deep, enjoying their astonishment. "I've run crooked card games, robbed them at the Big Ten when I got 'em blind enough on loaded drinks. Had 'em shot up or slugged in a side alley when they got too obstreperous—or too smart. Nobody could do much about it—'cause I was too big and too strong to be touched. Of course, I've made some bitter enemies too," he talked on reflectively, then smote the table again. "But them days are over—dead and gone; folks won't stand for it any more."

"Mebbe you aim to become a Bible-pounding circuit-riding preacher man, Speyer," the banker said testily. "Exactly what do you aim to do?"

The hidden Cully heard Speyer say: "Take over the law and order business-and make it pay. That's all. *Make it pay!*"

"How?" shot the banker.

"I get the killers of Phillips the marshal—as I'm going to; that puts me on the side of the Law in the eyes of the town. Then—"

"It smells of skunk sweat, somehow, to me," put in Willkins the gunman, flipping a silver dollar.

"Shut down—when I'm talking," Speyer threw at him nastily. "Like I was saying. I avenge the dead Phillips. Then I have myself proclaimed as special town marshal till Succara gits cleaned up."

"How do you get yourself proclaimed that?" Ridger asked.

"A little matter of acclamation by a bunch of citizens—which you'll see to does happen, Ridger.... Then I practically got a rough hold on Succara—only in the name of the Law. I start cleaning out the other gangs—Blacky Forell's bunch, for instance, that's been pulling them hold-ups. Then there Lucky Selvin who's got the other big gambling hall; I'll stage a raid on him to put him out of business. Willkins, by the way, if you keep your big jaw shut and let me do the thinking, you'll be my chief deputy."

Willkins' bony face split in a wide grin. "Thanks, boss."

"But how do you get anything out of it?" the banker said.

"Simple." He snapped a thumb and forefinger. "Like that; easy as spitting in the creek. When I knock 'em off, run 'em out, I grab what they got. Sabe?"

WILLKINS let go with that short whistle of his again; he liked this more and more all the time. Red Cully, peeking from under the cot, saw the silver coin flipping up faster and faster from his left hand.

One eye squinted up thoughtfully, Stach Speyer was going on. "Then they's Jarris and his Running-J outfit. We all know the gent is a crook, that he's rustling right and left, then runs the stolen cow critters over the State line and sells 'em. He'll have to be cut down—or straightened out, anyways; and he'll pay—but through the nose—to keep from a-gitting convicted at a trial. Oh, enforcing the Law can be made to pay all right, friend."

Under the cot, Cully was just wishing he could get out of there, or that they'd leave. He realized, too, that this was one hell of a vicious scheme this Speyer the gambler was cooking: a total well-constructed double-cross of the Law. But that meant little to the hunted man, Cully; the only thing that did was keeping his own hide whole—getting out and putting more distance between himself and that posse he'd thrown off temporarily.

Ridger said in his dry voice, "Yes, Stach, it has possibilities; big ones. But you'll have to expect trouble, have men bucking you, good gents and bad ones."

Speyer answered, "I've had gents bucking me afore, haven't I? And more'n one of 'em is now occupying a six-foot claim on Boothill."

Ridger blew out a cloud of cigar smoke from his bird-like, shrewd mean-lipped face. A typical banker, he was simply calculating risks. "That Johnie, the new girl at the Silver Moon Dancehall, she wouldn't

be—uh—sorta responsible for this, eh, Stach?" Ridger ever suspicious, with the nose of a pack rat to scent out a trap, had a hunch he wasn't being told everything about this new setup.

Stach Speyer's face became as stony as a carven mask. "She's a very fine young woman. No piece of dyed-haired trash. We'll keep her name outa this—if we all aim to keep healthy."

"Sure, she's a fine girl," Willkins yessed his boss.

Speyer went on, dropping that angle, talking like a man thinking out loud. "Yes, they's a few citizens, high and mighty ones, too, in Succara I happen to have something on. Working behind this marshal's badge," he tapped it as it lay on the table. "I can make 'em pay for *my* silence—to keep clear of the toils of the Law.... They can pay off to keep from being closed and run outa business, to settle for any disorders. Succara is going to be a fine clean upstandin' community with me bossing it." He chuckled again. "And lining my own pockets. Yes-s."

"It's a plumb wonderful idee, boss," Willkins said, flipping the coin even higher.

Under the cot, Cully heard the splash of liquor into the glasses as Speyer poured fresh drinks. *Why the devil can't they clear outa here now? Their business is all settled,* Cully was thinking. Then the silver dollar Willkins was flipping struck the corner of the table as the gunman missed the catch. It bounced off at a tangent, thudded against the blanket of the cot; dropped beside it and rolled a little way beneath toward Cully's belt buckle. Swearing, Willkins rose; Cully squeezed back hard against the wall beneath the bed. Willkins half bent.

"Aw, shucks, I cain't see it. What the hell? I'll have plenty more bigger'n that small change soon, won't I, boss?" Willkins wasn't even looking at the gambler king as he stepped backward several paces from the bed. The next minute he'd whipped one of those blackbutted guns from a tied-down holster. There was a click as he cocked it.

"Come outa there, you dirty sneaking coyote!" Willkins snapped in the scratchy voice, doubly sharp now. "Come out—you under the cot—or be carried out dead in the blanket! You in the batwing chaps—you, ya redhead! I'm firing at ten. One—two—three—four—"

2

THERE WAS nothing else for Cully to do but obey. In that cramped position, he couldn't get in much effective shooting anyway. It was two against one, at least. At Willkins' words, Speyer's chair had gone over with a crash as he bolted out of it: now he'd disappeared from Cully's limited line of vision.

"Shove out your hardware, mister!" Speyer called.

"—six—seven" Willkins was continuing the count.

Red Cully shoved out the gunbelt with the two .45-filled holsters that he'd removed and had rolled beside him when he took his shuteye under the bunk. Then he worked out from the cot, coming up on one knee to blink around in the full glare of the lamplight. He sighted Ridger first, over by the door with a hand on the knob. The paunchy banker was ready to bolt.

The raw-boned Willkins sprang over, clipped Red Cully a light blow, but enough to daze him, across the side of the head. Then, seizing his worn leather vest, he hauled Cully to his feet. Holding a gun in his side, he ran a big hand over Cully for hideout weapons, found none. Willkins

shoved him down hard on the bunk and scooped up the shell belt with Cully's two guns.

"Who are you, pelican? What're you doing here? Who hired you to sneak in here and listen to our talk?" flung Stach Speyer in the opening of a cross examination. "What the hell's your game?"

Cully lay back, shoulders against the rough wall, eyeing them dully. He was still boogered down with fatigue, weak from lack of grub. And though they held cocked guns on him, were desperate because of what he'd overheard, he didn't care too much. When your life's been at stake for a long enough period, the strain becomes simply a heavy dull weight; living ceases to be an imperative thing any more. That posse was due to run him down sooner or later, he felt anyway.

"Open up your jaw and start talking," Willkins snapped.

Cully blinked slowly. "I'm just a stranger in off the trail," he said dully. "Riding the grubline. Don't know who you jaspers are—and don't have no interest in what you aim to do."

Ridger the banker said, "Sure. But you hid under that bed there."

Cully didn't answer. His head sagged a little to one side. One of his legs stirred, touching the weather-warped flat-crowned gray sombrero he'd pushed out with his guns. There was no belligerence, no terror about him; he was a man who'd ceased to care much any more. The experienced gambler studied him, taking in the rangy big-boned body with the flat waist, the long thin legs encased in dirty shotgun pants. And the long powerful hands, the kind of hands crack gunman are born with.

"What's your handle? Where're you from?" demanded Willkins, moving again as if to deal out another gun barrel blow.

"Cully's the name," the captive said without bothering to think of an alias. "Forget where I come from .. A heap of places, maybe."

WILLKINS lifted his drawn weapon. "Willkins," Speyer spat at him. The gambling king appraised the captive again; he wasn't as heavy or as burly as Stach Speyer himself though Cully was just six feet in height. Something told Speyer the spark had gone out in this hombre, that he was little more than a hunted sick animal asking for only a hole to crawl into. And yet, Speyer guessed, there had been a day when things had been different with him.

Speyer's blank, light-blue eyes, large and bulging slightly even in his broad heavy face, checked the rumpled red hair of this Cully. The sun-bronzed face with the gaunt cheekbones and the dark deepset eyes; the wide mouth, almost hidden by trail dirt and beard stubble, that could have been powerful once. If he weren't such a beaten thing now, this Cully could have had a peculiar fascinating look. Once he would have been the breed not to be trifled with. Stach Speyer had judged many gents in his day; it was part of his business as a card sharp gambler.

On impulse, Speyer nodded to Willkins and pointed to the bottle on the table. "Give him a slug."

Willkins obeyed. Red Cully took it with an unsteady hand and dumped it down, still sullen-faced after swallowing. He sat up, elbows on his thighs. Speyer said: "Where're you headed for? What were you doing here in the first place?"

Cully shrugged. "Heading for anywhere—nowhere. What I was doing here—" Then he remembered he was a wanted man with a thousand on his head. These jaspers could turn him in. "—ain't nobody's business," he ended.

And Willkins stepped in and cracked him a gun barrel blow over the cheek that brought blood. Willkins grabbed him by the dark red hair and yanked his head back and poised another blow. "Talk up, you mangy saddle bum! Don't you know the boss is the biggest man in Succarra? Stach Speyer could git you smoked down easy and slick. He—"

"Shut down, you fool!" Speyer spat

at his overeager gun-guard.

Cully said, "I been asleep. Been riding for days. I don't know anything; didn't hear anything neither. Let me alone."

Speyer's opaque eyes narrowed a moment. He guessed it then: the man was a fugitive from a posse. This gent wouldn't be running to any John Law with a story of what he'd overheard here. "Reckon we can just start him down the trail in the opposite direction from Succara with a warning," he began. "We can—"

Ridger jerked his bespectacled head negatively. "No! He heard too danged much! He could try to sell his information." His eyes glinted mercilessly. "Take him down the trail ....But don't let him ride off able to wag his jaw."

SPEYER hesitated. There was a rap on the door. It was the barkeep with a note for Speyer; it had just been delivered by a rider. Closing the door, Speyer read it quickly, then crumpled it and stuck it in a coat pocket. He wore a hard smile. "The tipoff from the source I expected," he announced, picking up his hat. "Them Barron Brothers are holed up in an old cabin at the creek crossing to the north. Just about a half mile. Drunk, too. We'll git 'em; it should be plumb easy."

"How about him?" Ridger insisted, indicating Red Cully.

Speyer made a quick decision, ordering Cully to stand. "We'll take him along—handle his case. You're right—he could talk. Up that lonely creek though plenty of things can happen to a stranger. Keep him guarded, Willkins." He opened the door to lead the way out.

Ridger and the gambler shook hands; the banker said he'd leave when the coast was clear; he was returning to Succara. Willkins, with Cully's gunbelt looped over one arm, prodded the latter in the back with a fist of ironlike knuckles. "I'm carrying one hogleg next to my leg, Cully," he warned. "Try some tricks and you'll be holding a daisy in a dewclaw afore you can spit twice.... Walk ahead—after the boss!"

Cully shambled after the gambler king who walked with a rigid-backed, military bearing despite his heavy body. They moved into the barroom. Two others with thronged-down holsters like Willkins moved away from the counter and joined them. Speyer threw a few words to them in an undertone, mentioning the Barron brothers. The new pair nodded. They all went out, Red Cully amidst them. They picked up Cully's crowbait from the hitchrail, moved down the settlement's single street, afoot in the night, to where they'd left their ponies at the livery barn.

"This seems almost too danged easy," Stach Speyer said as they mounted in the feed barn alley. "But I never complain about good luck.... Only I've had a peculiar feeling we was being watched since we got here."

They sloped their ponies out of the settlement to the creek, then took the cart track that ran up beside one bank. In a vague way, Red Cully wondered what was going to happen to him. It seemed as if the cards were stacked against him, irrevocably; that he was doomed. And, completely hopeless, he was about ready to accept doom; he might as well have his light put out for accidentally overhearing something he didn't give a hoot about as have that posse from Red Sands give him a catching and make a cottonwood apple out of him. On the spot, probably too.

* * *

AS THEY rode through the chill night Cully's thoughts went back to Red Sands off to the southeast. His mind leapfrogged back through the months to the time when he'd been the segundo on the cow outfit in the big valley up north of the town. Then he'd lost his head over Tess, the new waitress who'd come to the hotel in town; forgotten about the little outfit he'd been planning to pick up with the hard-saved dinero in the bank. Gone completely haywire over the little minx. Been driven half wild because she let other men in town take her out.

He'd finally thrown up his ranch job and moved into Red Sands to see her more often; frittered away his savings to buy her clothes and jewelry. He'd taken to gambling to get more, then to heavy drinking to cool his jealousy. She'd finally promised to marry him. A date had been set. The whole town knew it. And the morning of the event, Red had been left waiting at the church; the girl had run off with a well-to-do drummer with whom she'd been having an affair while he stayed at the hotel. Red Cully, laughing stock of Red Sands, had really blown his skypiece then.

He'd drunk himself sodden night after night, finally becoming a barroom bum, cadging drinks, doing dirty odd jobs to get the price of one. More than once he'd been pitched out into the gutter. Several times he'd been badly beaten up. He'd lost his nerve too, eating crow one night when a stranger had called upon him to fill his hand; after that, he had been finished.

Then had come the night when, desperate, he'd joined with some saloon toughs who held up Peffer's Dry Goods and Notions store. Old Peffer had been shot down. The others had gotten away clean; but Red Cully had been recognized. And Peffer's brother was mayor of the pueblo. Cully had known it would avail him nothing at a trail to swear he hadn't fired his hogleg once—as he hadn't. So he'd run for it, branded a low-down cowardly barroom bum who'd killed. And now....

THERE WAS a soft-spoken command from Speyer and they dismounted. Upstream could be seen a little cabin on the bank. There were trees on either side of them. But further on the cart track ran in the open under the jaundiced moon; the killers could see them approach too easily. Speyer said they'd work up in the water of the shallow creek.

"Reckon we'd better truss this galloot up and take care of him afterward, boss?" Willkins asked.

Red Cully felt himself trembling inside his big-boned six-foot frame. Even though you cared no more for anything in life, it was an ugly feeling to know you were going to die. He wanted to go down on his knees and beg, and he silently cursed himself for the feeling. He'd lost his own self respect, knew he was no better than a mongrel cur dog.

Speyer was heeling out his quirly in the dust, about to answer. Then Cully, eyes twisting in panic in his head, saw a figure back amongst the trees on the left as the breeze made an opening in the foliage. He glimpsed the gent's heavy mustache, his white calfskin vest. Al Childs, deputy leading the Red Sands posse, he was certain. Cully gagged as he imagined the inevitable hangrope about his neck. A final instinct to live, a last spark of manhood flared up in him.

With snakelike speed, his right hand dipped. He'd slithered the Colts from the holster of one of Speyer's gun guards before the other realized it had even been touched. With a tremendous spring to his left, Red Cully slammed lead at that spot in the trees.

The crackle of the gun was immediately followed by the shouts of men waiting in ambush in there; they came breaking out, slamming the triggers at Stach Speyer's little bunch....

3

FIGHTING like a big cornered animal, Red Cully didn't know yet the would-be dry gulchers were not the posse after him. He fired again. One of them spun back in the shadows, clutching a shoulder. Cully's desperation-impelled play had saved Speyer and his handful from being blasted down at once, given them the warning, the chance to draw and fight back.

The short gun-guard sank, drilled through the chest, his sombrero flapping off. He lay still with his bald head glistening like an egg in the grayish moonlight. Stach himself had jumped in amidst the ponies and was shooting from under the belly of one horse. Tall Willkins had dropped back behind a boulder at the right side of the trail and had his two weapons speaking. Lead whistled around Red Cully; he backed down the trail in the direction from whence they'd come.

A slug from the left and at an angle a little behind nicked the sleeve of his shirt. Like a big cat, Cully twisted, he dropped to a knee and leveled on a man dimly seen in the brush. Even as he fired and the man screeched with pain, Cully saw that he wore a neckerchief mask over the lower half of his face. Posses didn't wear masks.

He guessed then it was some enemies of the gambler's. No lead burned at him for a few seconds; the real battle was up by the ponies where the others were. The hunted man, in a split second, decided on a gamble. Afoot he would soon be picked up again, and the ponies of the ambush bunch would doubtlessly be ground-anchored somewhere behind them. He plunged into the brush and the end of the little stand of trees, stumbling, flinging ahead.

He figured he was beyond their line, behind them, when a squat figure appeared before him and let out a roar. He had a huge moonlike face, and Cully unconsciously noted that he was one-armed, the left one being just a stump above the elbow. Then the guns of each blazed muzzle flame; they both missed. Like a wild stampeding horse, Cully, trying to fight through for a few more hours of freedom, of living, sprang at him, clubbed with his gun barrel. The other staggered back into a heavy thicket and was lost from sight.

Cully cared nothing about the man, about anybody who didn't block his way. He rounded the thicket and charged on toward the creek bank; then one boot caught in an exposed root. He plunged headlong and his head struck a stump. He lay there, half conscious but too stunned to rise. He heard the one-armed gent shouting something; heard men running back through the stand of trees. One passed a couple of yards from his prone body. Then came the splash of their boots in the creek water.

They were getting the hell out, quitting the melee. There was the sound of a pony crashing through the undergrowth across the creek. Red Cully pushed himself up to his knees in time to see the last of the ambushers scrambling up the opposite bank; when the breeze parted the tree tops over there to let moonlight seep through, he saw some shadowy figures in the saddles as they threw home spur steel and pulled out. Cully swore in a voice hoarse with frustration.

"Hey, Cully!" It was Stach Speyer coming through the saplings on his right, two guns gripped in his hands.

THE FUGITIVE might have tried to jump the gambler, to beat him with a shot. Then he remembered that his lone stolen piece of hardware had clicked on an empty shell when he'd tried to fire the second time against the one-armed jasper.

He went back to the road with Speyer. The short gunman was dead; Willkins had received a slight scratch in the flesh of one shoulder, nothing serious. That was all. That and a dead gunslinger with a pock-marked face they found among the trees. They identified him as one Anderson from Succara. Stach Speyer rubbed his thick mustache.

"Uh huh.... Anderson worked for Blacky Forell once. Rode with his bunch, didn't he? Sure. Then they had some kind of a falling out," the gambler mused alone. "But mebbe Anderson went back with him again."

"Anderson was dead broke—trying to borrow dinero around town last week," Willkins put in.

Speyer nodded, pulling down his hat. "Looks like that answers it. Looks like Forell—and he always was a smart snake—tried to stop me from grabbing the Barron boys. Meb-

be Blacky aimed to bring them in himself and git himself set right with the new Vigilante organization." He pushed the dead man gently with his foot; then his peculiarly light-hued eyes swung up and fastened on Red Cully.

"You're sure the big swift with a hogleg, mister," Stach said thoughtfully. "Fast and sure when the chips are down; that's the kind of an hombre I like to have around me, Mr. Cully. We'd uh been cut to buzzard bait if you hadn't spotted 'em and made the first jump."

Cully muttered something sheepishly. It had been a long spell since a man had done anything but curse or despise him. Stach went on: "You can ride off scot free, mister.... Or you can string along with us; I might be able to use you. And when Stack Speyer can use a man, he ain't cheap with the payoff dinero."

Cully decided to string along without exactly knowing why. Maybe it was the instinct of the lost dog who follows a stranger. After all, he had nowhere else to go. He swung up as they mounted.

Stach said the gunfire had probably warned the Barron brothers. But they rode up to the tumble-down cabin where a road coming across the range went through the creek. There was no light from the place.

"This might be another trap," Stach opined as they dismounted beyond short-gun range. They had the dead gunguard's body, the late Joe Spane, roped across the saddle of his cayuse. "Give Cully his own hardware; we might need every man we got."

Willkins sneered but unhooked Red Cully's gunbelt from his saddle horn and passed it over. When the latter buckled it on, somehow he felt more like a real man than he could remember being in a long time. They fanned out and moved on the cabin. There was only the gurgle of the creek. Then Willkins made a short rush up onto the sagging porch, took a kick at the door, then jumped to one side. Still nothing happened.

They moved inside, guns ready. And in the moonglow that filtered through a grimy unshuttered side window of the front room, they saw the two skinny swarthy Barron brothers. Phil Barron lay stretched on the plank floor, arms outflung, upturned face a waxy hue. There was a small puddle of blood beside his head. He had been fatally shot through the side of the skull. Toby Barron, the other brother, was propped in a corner, snoring, lashed hand and foot. Drunken. The room reeked with the odor of redeye that had been spilled from the overturned tub in the fracas.

IT WAS plain that the band that had tried to drygulch Speyer had first taken care of the Barrons, had intended to bring Toby in and turn him over to justice.

They lighted up a stub of candle on the table and cut Toby Barron free. Willkins slapped him around till he came out of his stupor. He talked thickly; he'd been too orey-eyed to know who'd jumped him and his dead brother. When threatened with immediate hanging, he confessed to shooting Phillips the town marshal with his dead brother's aid. Their motive was the fact that some months ago, Phillips had trapped a third brother, Aaron, in a hold-up that had resulted in his being sent to the Big House for a number of years.

"We got what we want," Stach said. "Let's head back."

The Barrons' ponies were in a shed behind the place. They put the dead brother across one saddle, hoisted the now shackled Toby Barron into the other. And they started back down the trail to the settlement with Succara as their objective. Stach Speyer hummed under his black mustache. He had taken the first hand in this game; he felt good about it. When they halted to water their ponies, he came over to Red Cully.

"Cully, I been thinking. I got plans for you. Big ones.... You heard the talk when you were under the cot. So you know what I'm after."

Red Cully nodded; no sense in pretending now he hadn't.

Stach dropped a hand on Red's shoulder. "I'll need an undercover gent—somebody that nobody in Succara will associate with me. It'll be risky work, mebbe, but the payoff'll be good. And I think you'd fill the bill because—I'm guessing—you don't give much of a hoot what happens to you."

Cully cracked a wry grin. His eyes were gloomy spots in his face though. "I better keep riding, Mr. Speyer, I reckon.... I still can't git shed of an old-fashioned habit of wanting to keep breathing."

STACH flipped his quirly stub into the stream. "You'd be on my payroll at a hundred—a hundred a week, Cully. And there'd be a two thousand bonus in it for you when we get Succara cleaned up—the way I want it cleaned up."

Cully looked up at the waning stars. He was terribly tired. "I gotta keep riding, Mr. Speyer. If you could provide me with a fresh pony—that'd be fine. But I gotta push on.... I'm a fugitive from the Law, you see!" He coughed on the chill night. "They say I killed a man; they're after me."

Stach Speyer's eyes smiled, then he quickly lidded them. This was right up his alley, what he liked. A man he could hold something over! He laughed. "Well, what of it? I'll be the Law in Succara. Let any outside badge-packer try to take you in!"

Red Cully's head jerked around and his dark deep-sunk eyes probed Stach. The beaten gloomy look faded from those eyes like something sinking in dark waters; they even got a gleam of hope. The slack mouth firmed up. This was what he thought there never would be got him again, a form of salvation, a surcease from being a prey. He didn't care how crooked Stach Speyer's game was. With Speyer, siding him, working for him, he would be safe for a spell at least.

Red Cully nodded. "You bought yourself a man, Mr. Speyer."

4

TWO DAYS later, in the forenoon, Stach Speyer returned to Succara like a conqueror. Smart as a politician, he'd sent word in ahead that he was coming back with the killers of the late marshal, Phillips. And Ridger had played his part; there was a crowd in the streets of the big range town.

Speyer rode in at the head of the little band. The two dead ones, were in a wagon and wrapped in tarpaulins. Toby Barron, one of the confessed killers, was just behind the gambler king. Gents ran out from the wooden sidewalks to revile him; some threw stones at him. The cheers welled up for Stach Speyer as the bunch neared the two-story adobe jailhouse.

Red Cully saw it all as a spectator. On Speyer's instructions, he'd ridden in ahead, alone. Speyer had given him some dinero and Red had gotten himself another bellyful of grub. It seemed as if he could never get enough chow after what he'd been through. He'd gotten a bath, as well as a shave and haircut, and felt a lot more like a human being. From the steps of the General Merchandise Store on the corner across from the jailhouse, he watched the triumphal procession.

Stach yelled out once, thumbing back at Toby Barron, "He confessed to it, folks!" Then they were swinging out of the saddles before the *cuartel*. Asa Holden, a tall spare man with iron-gray hair, chief of the Vigilantes, stepped out and shook Stach's hand warmly; dust drifted over the scene as the throng closed in on prisoner and his captors, Toby Barron, sullen and pale, was hustled into the jailhouse. A couple of minutes later, Stach reappeared on the

little roofless stoop at the top of the steps, Holden beside him. The mob, well-laced with barroom toughs and hangers-on let out another shout. Stach smiled modestly.

"He's one slick actor," the watching Culley told himself.

Stach held up a hand. When he got comparative silence, he stated solemnly, "Marshal Phillips has been avenged. I just felt it was my duty." He waited till that shout died down, then went on, "A new day—a new order—is a-coming to Succara, and I'm the first to admit it. Times have changed. This town ain't a-going to be a lobos roost or a hell-town no more, and I'm going to be the first to pledge myself to back the Law with everything I got." He lifted his right hand as if taking an oath. Behind him, Willkins covered the grinning side of his mouth with a tanned hand.

"As proof of what I say, that I mean business, come tonight at sundown, my place, the Big Ten, shuts down permanent; I swear it. The days of disorder and violence are a thing of the past for Succara. Hell holes and dives have got to be cleaned out. The lawless element—well, we just got to make this place too danged hot for 'em. So I'm shutting down the Big Ten because I realize it attracted said element. *The Law comes first!*"

THE CROWD, fanned out right across the wide road, gaped in amazement for some moments. Some began to cheer again. Then a ponderous figure in a black tail coat with flowing silvery locks showing beneath a slouch hat trotted up the steps to stand beside Stach Speyer. The man was Judge Lem Rosser, a retired member of the State bench, affluent, a leading citizen of the town. Nobody seemed to know how he'd gotten all his money, but he was known as a paragon of justice and integrity who presided over the makeshift town court when called upon to do so.

"My good friend; Mr. Speyer, is absolutely correct, my friends," he yammered out of a mouth like a slit in a pumpkin. "A new day has dawned on Succara, a day fresh and clean as a new-born babe, without stain as yet. And we must see that it remains that way, that our prosperous community enjoys an era of peace and righteousness and lawfulness. I propose we hold an immediate election for a new town marshal." He shook the silvery locks that fell almost to his shoulders. His jowls quivered in his red face. "Or, if that is not advisable, that an acting marshal be apponted until a duly elected one can take office. Yass. And I'm here to offer my services in any way that this bustling community sees fit to use me, my friends. Yass." He swept off his black slouch hat, beaming around so that his gold teeth showed.

Rosser was making his bid for the job, the watching Red Cully realized; he saw Stach's face harden. The judge swung back his tail coat to reveal a white vest spanned by a heavy golden watchchain and went on loudly. "We need a man, a citizen of Succara, as marshal who possesses those outstanding virtues of honesty and fearlessness, a man who has legal experience, who knows the Law itself as written in the books, a man who—"

A barroom hanger-on, who'd been hired by Ridger for a couple of dollars to beat the drum for Stach Speyer, broke in with a powerful voice. "A man who can sling a gun in a pinch—not some pot-bellied windbag! And who the blazes brought in Mike Phillips' murderers, anyway? Stach Speyer did!"

"Speyer's proved himself for the job!" another of the hired backers bawled.

The cry ran through the emotionalized crowd like fire in dry prairie grass. Judge Lem Rosser tried to make himself heard again but was drowned out. His face fell as Stach stood calmly smiling. The shout gathered momentum. "Speyer for marshal! Speyer for marshal!"

The thing was put over then and there. Banker Ridger came through the throng to mount the jail steps. He conferred with stern-visaged but aging Asa Holden, Vigilante head, then called down to some of the leading citizens in the forefront of the crowd. The banker lifted his stovepipe hat to get their attention, then announced: "In as much as it seems to be the will of the citizens of Succara, we hereby appoint George Stach Speyer acting marshal of this town!" And he pinned the badge of the late Marshal Phillips, that Stach had turned over to him in that settlement barroom, onto Stach's coat. The mob, stampeded into the thing like a herd of cattle, roared louder than ever. Those jammed up close to the jail, at least; they'd been given the tipoff by Ridger the banker.

But Cully noted that many men around the outside of the crowd were staring at each other flabbergasted. Somebody beside the store steps said, "Holy Pete! By grab, a crooked gambler made gun-boss of this pueblo! I'd uh never believed it! Never," And up on the step behind Cully, a sawed-off jasper with a jagged knife scar like a wriggling snake on his cheek, spoke to a pard. Cully had looked over the sawed-off one before; He had the gun wolf stamp all over him.

He said sotto-voiced to his friend, "They's some kind of a trick in this, Billy. Stach Speyer could no more go straight than he could deal 'em honest. A wildcat don't go tame over night. But Blacky Forell ain't going to be fooled; he's already got some aces up his sleeve. I better go talk with him." Scar-face went down the steps past Cully.

RED CULLY smirked a little, then got a sick feeling; he knew the inside story, of how the gambler king intended to doublecross the town. It was going to be a dirty game, dirty and lowdown. Then, moving down the street, the feel of dinero in his pants pocket, he thought of himself. So long as Stach Speyer was law boss here and held the winning cards, he, Red Cully, was safe. And a man had to look over his own hide first.

He moved down the main drag toward the lower end of the cowtown. It was sprawled over a big low hummock in the valley floor with the older rundown section, including its Whisky Row, straggling off southward from the tail end of the hummock like a poor relation. On the west side of the hummock, there were the twin steel ribbons, of the railroad coming down from the north end of the valley, paralleling the creek. Succara's main road, stretching due east and west, ran down to it and then sloped up over the bulge to peter out in Whisky Row. Before it got there the main stem was a broad street flanked by the boxlike structure of stores and buildings. With their haphazard spacing, their varying heights, they gave the town a saw-toothed like profile when seen from either north or south. There was the smell of green lumber from the newer buildings, and at several points there was the pound of carpenters' hammers as they worked on the framework for yet another structure. In vacant spots, tents were pitched as temporary housing for some new business venture. Succara reminded Red Cully of a lush woman, brash and eager, still short of maturity.

He went on down the main line, over the hummock, then followed the twist of the road down into Whisky Row. It had a barren feel in the daylight. He found the place labelled "Rosie's," a mangy low-ceiled bar, went in and bought a drink. The two-hundred-and-fifty pound Rosie served him herself. This was the place where Speyer said he would get in touch with him.

An hour passed. Cully took a glass of beer and went over and sat at one of the side tables, listening to the conversation around him. It was pretty much of the same general tenor down there in Whisky Row. Stach Speyer was pulling a fast one; there was something behind his grabbing

the office of town marshal. Nobody believed he actually meant to go straight. Then a newcomer arrived with news. There had been a shooting over a card game at the gambling hall run by Lucky Selvin, Speyer's rival in the business. One man was badly wounded. But the dealer who'd shot him was in the clear; the beaten man had gone for his gun first. It was self defense.

"Now we'll see what Stach Speyer does," was the general opinion.

Another gent came in. "They're boarding up Speyer's Big Ten," he announced. "Got the front doors locked. Threw the card tables out in the back yard and hacked 'em up with an axe. Everybody's been let go with two weeks pay; mebbe Stach ain't fooling at that."

Still there was an air of doubt. Cully himself sat trying to figure it. From what he'd heard when under that cot down in the settlement barroom, he knew what Stach Speyer's scheme was. And yet—thus far—it almost looked as if he might be on the square.

ANOTHER hour. Afternoon. And then two orey-eyed gents tangled at the bar. A third jumped into it, all going for gun butts. Friends grabbed them. One gun went off twice into the floor, then a slug whistled just past Red Cully's shoulder. He was out of the chair like a cat, crouched against the side wall behind the table, eyes slicing around. And Red picked him out, up near the front end of the bar, the one-armed man he'd encountered a couple of nights ago in the attempted ambush out near the cabin where they'd found the Barron brothers.

He was standing there, legs spread as if rooted, his right arm hanging loose, the hand empty, by his side. He wore a pinch-topped gray sombrero, a black shirt, black pants. He stared openly at Cully. His wide jawed leathery face studded with eyes like glass balls gave no hint of any emotion. He just stood and looked, unabashed.

Cully was dead certain this one man had thrown lead at him. Yet the man held no weapon, and a Colt was lodged in the holster on his right hip. Then Cully's eyes caught sight of the smoking gun on the floor some yards to the right of the one-armed jasper. He looked back of the man whose face gleamed with a sweat film through a cool breeze wafted through the place.

The next moment the wrangling gents had swung over to cut off sight of the one-armed hombre. Then Rosie reached over the bar with a bung starter, rapped one of them atop the head to knock him unconscious, and the ruckus was over. Cully rose and came out from behind the table, crossing the barroom. But the one-armed man had vanished.

The tall Willkins came in and up to Cully. Willkins spat a stream of tobacco juice on the floor. "The boss has some orders. Follow me...."

5

THEY WENT out and down a side alley that straggled off into the brush. Cully was still thinking of the unblinking stare of the one-armed gent. There was a little cabin. Willkins led the way in. But Stach wasn't there; nobody was there aside from the two of them. Willkins thumbed at clothes on a bunk. "There's your new rig. Boss' orders," he said.

Cully stared. There was a pearl-gray coat, a pair of pants to match, a sombero of the same color with a brass-studded hatband. Also a fancy blue silk shirt. And standing beside the bunk was a pair of brand new boots with silver inlaid curleycues in the toes, the kind of boots a dudish cowhand would save up a couple of month's salary to afford.

"Got a real purty roan stallion out back for you too," Willkins said, spitting again.

"What's the idea?" Cully asked, suspicious.

Willkins pulled a folded piece of paper from a pocket, squinted, and began to read his instructions slowly. "You're a-going to be Big Red Lindsay, the famous gunslinger."

Cully cocked an eyebrow; he'd heard of this Lindsay, vaguely. The man was a dangerous gunfighter, yet no outlaw—a man who, despite a shadowy reputation, made a business of hiring out his guns. Especially to towns that craved a cleaning up. Cully recalled that this Lindsay had disappeared more than a year ago, according to the stories. He said: "I still don't savvy. Supposing somebody here knows Big Red. Supposin' Big Red himself should ride in."

Willkins shifted his tobacco plug to the other cheek, looked at his notes on the paper again. "Stach says Big Red was never in Succara; he's down in Mexico now, and they's no danger of him coming—here." He paused to squint at the writing. "Stach has something on him, so he'd never show now." He looked up. "You take this rig, ride outa town to the other side of the valley, change clothes, then come in 'round sundown—as Big Red Lindsay. Stach will have word passed around in—ahead of time, that Big Red is due to come. Sabe?"

"No," Cully said flatly.

Willkins studied the paper some more. "You will pass as this Lindsay, the tophand gunfighter; you will hang around the bars and honky tonks and just wait."

"For what, Wilkins?"

"Till somebody makes a proposition to you, Cully. That's Stach's idea. You're his under-cover hombre. Nobody knows you're in his hire. Stach wants to find who'll be the first to try to buck him, and that bunch'll certainly try to buy the services of a gent they take for Big Red Lindsay. He was red-headed like you and he always favored gray."

Cully nodded, frowning a little. "I see it now."

"Yeah. You're to listen to any proposition, try to find out who's behind it, what the layout is. When you get any information, come to the boss' room at the hotel during the night. Room 318, she is. Them's your orders." He took our a wad of bills. "And here's your first week's pay, Cully."

With the new clothes bundled up, they went out into the brush behind the shack. There was the roan stallion, a big spirited animal. Red Cully swung up into the fine silver-mounted saddle. Stach Speyer, he decided, sure was no two-bit tinhorn.

"Remember," said Willkins. "You ain't Red Cully no more. You never knew him; he's dead—maybe. You're Big Red Lindsay—from now on." He spoke the words like a parrot who's memorized them.

Red nodded, picked up the reins. And, raw-boned face harsh, Willkins added something on his own. "Let me give you a little tip, Red. The boss hates a man who tries to double-cross him or take a runout. Stach never forgets that, never forgives it, either. He never rests peaceful till he's settled with the man." He cracked a grin that wasn't pleasant. "And the settling ain't nice...."

Red looked down at him, deep dark eyes hard. He knew then that he could never like this gunslinger, Willkins. And that Willkins hoped the day would come when he, Red, would make a slip....

NIGHT HAD settled over bustling Succara with the whisky mills and honky tonks going full blast as usual. All the talk was of the new town marshal, of the alleged reform of Stach Speyer, of how the Big Ten actually was closed now, and how Speyer had announced the appointment of Willkins as his chief deputy. They speculated on what his first move would be, on how sincere he'd prove himself about upholding the Law.

Stach himself was up in his hotel room in the big Central House. He was freshly shaven and barbered, all spruced up, the black coat open to reveal the marshal's badge on his shirt front. He fussed nervously with the string of black bow tie at the neck of his fresh white shirt. There was a drink on the table beside him, but he had scarcely touched it; he had eyes and senses only for the woman who sat in the chair opposite

him. She was Johnie from the Blue Moon Dancehall.

She was so slim-waisted and willowy that she looked taller than she was. High-bosomed with a certain regal air about the way she bore herself. She was a far cry from the usual brassy-haired dancehall hussy; a brunette to begin with, the black hair wound around the crown of her head in a gleaming coil. She had a narrow face with wide dark eyes and a full long mouth that drove Stach half locoed with desire. She wasn't young, nearing thirty. Stach had known more striking, more vivid girls in his time; yet Johnie possessed the beauty of serenity, of a deep poise. She was unusual in that she did not try to attract men.

"You've made the first step, anyway, Stach," she said in her low voice that made a person lean toward her to hear.

"Yeah." He expelled quirly smoke, then hurriedly waved a hand at it to dissipate it as it drifted her way. "I'm town marshal. Never'd believed it could happen to me, by grab." Actually he'd gotten far more kick out of being appointed than he thought possible.

Johnie Drews rose without looking at him and moved over to the window. She drew the silken shawl about the shoulders left bare by her flowing-skirted, maroon evening dress. Stood looking out, unseeing, with a little frown. It made Stach uneasy.

"And I sure will bring a reign of law and order to this pueblo," he proclaimed.

Johnie nodded. "I hope so, Stach; I hope so. You promised me you would—that you'd go straight and back the Law."

"I aim to, honey," Stach said, rising and going to her and attempting to drop an arm around her shoulders.

She slid away from it, head slightly bent in thought. "You've got to understand, Stach. I love you, and I believe you can be a real man, not a trickster, a cold-decking gambler. You've got something in you bigger than that."

"I'm a-trying, Johnie," Stach said solemnly. Yet his eyes twisted away a moment as he stood behind her. This was such a wonderful opportunity for a cleanup. Working from behind the cover of a lawman's badge, a gent could really take this town over.

Johnie Drews gave him a quick look over her shoulder. "You've got to understand my point of view, Stach. I know there are good men outside the Law—that there are human rats who ride under its protection....but I don't want to go through life by the side of a man who is bucking it."

STACH PUT down his drink and grabbed one of her arms from behind. "But you are a-going to marry me, Johnie; you promised."

She nodded once. "When you show me you can go straight—by cleaning up this town, Stach!" Something like a sigh escaped her. "You've got to remember what I came from. My father was a common horse-thief, caught and strung up from a cottonwood limb when I was still a child. My uncle, who moved into the house, was a drunkard and a cheating monte dealer. They rode him out of town on a rail." With a forefinger, she traced a haphazard pattern in the dust of one of the window panes. "Cal, my older brother, had a little cow outfit. But he was mixed up with a rustling bunch and had to flee the country; I've never seen him since."

"I know. You told me," Stach said with an unwonted gentleness.

"Sam, my other brother, the one who wanted to be a doctor—" Her voice broke a moment, then steadied. "was killed right here in Succarra, stabbed in an alley by some saloon toughs who'd seen the dinero he was carrying. Nothing was ever done about it....I had to fight my way up. I've tried to play straight. It hasn't always been easy."

"I know," Stach said. "You're wonderful, Johnie." He put his hand on her shoulder again, but she shook it off.

"Stach, there was the owner of a cow outfit down near the Line. He wanted to marry me. I—I guess I cared for him somewhat. But I

learned he'd gotten his outfit by cheating a partner who'd suddenly disappeared. There was another man, a tall handsome red-headed man. I knew I loved him. But when I learned he was a gunfighter, I just packed and left town suddenly. Stach, I want a man who's inside the Law. Who's straight. And who'll prove it by backing the Law."

"I'm going to prove it to you, Johnie!" Stach cleared his voice, husky with emotion. He wanted this woman as he'd never known that want before. A man could really build a life with a woman like this. "You've reformed me; why, the Big Ten is shut up, ain't it?"

She turned to face him, her eyes meeting his squarely. "So far—yes, Stach. But, somehow, this town is symbolic to me. I want to see it cleaned up so nothing like what happened to Sam, my brother, can happen to another young man here. You're a man—a man with tremendous possibilities. You—you can do it. Do it and—"

Stach Speyer's arms went around her, drew the willowy body to him. And that time she did not try to evade his embrace....

RED CULLY, in the role of Big Red Lindsay, tophand gunfighter, was back in the Silver Moon Dancehall. Following instructions, he had come over the hummock into the main town just as the sun settled behind the western hills. Riding along the main drag, he'd seen men look at him, point him out as they recognized him as Big Red Lindsay. He stopped off at one bar, moved to another, letting himself be seen. Hit a third. Gents moved away to give him elbow room when he stepped to the counter. He'd overheard the whispers.

He'd gone into one big honky tonk dancehall, moseyed around to another bar. Then he'd returned to the dancehall, drawn there by an urge even though he tried to keep his mind on business, Stach Speyer's business. This place was called "The Silver Moon", he'd noted on re-entering. And Red had been drawn back to see the black-headed woman with her sleek hair arranged in glistening coils. He'd seen her when he'd been there earlier, watched her as she danced a flowing waltz with a man. And, watching her, for the first time all thought of the provocative Tess, who'd double-crossed him back home, had fled from Cully's mind; he had never clapped eyes on anything like this black-haired woman.

He was standing at the bar, trying to seek her out as the little orchestra pounded out a Mexican air. She didn't seem to be there. A girl with hair dyed red as fire sidled up to him invitingly. Red shook his head. She said something about how redheads should be friends.

He pulled the new gray sombrero lower. "Have to excuse me, ma'm," he muttered. "I gotta meet a man here on business." Turned away.

A little sharp-faced gent who'd stepped in on his left said softly, "And mebbeso I'm that man, Lindsay."

Red looked down at him, then turned to his drink. "Don't reckon so, mister; you're a plumb stranger to me."

The hombre with the knife-sharp nose smiled. "Not so much as you think, Big Red. I was in Hondo the night you smoked it out with Bart Newfield the outlaw. I was even introduced to you later at a bar when you was celebrating."

Red Cully kept his face blank. "I meet a heap of folks the way I move around. Can't remember 'em all. I—Hey!" He scowled at the fresh drink the barkeep had shoved in front of him. The little man had signalled him to set up two.

"Drink hearty, Lindsay. Then I want you to meet a gent who craves to meet you," the little man said. "Me, I ain't important; but my friend, he can make it well worth your time."

This was what he'd been expecting. Red looked around. "And who might your friend be, stranger?"

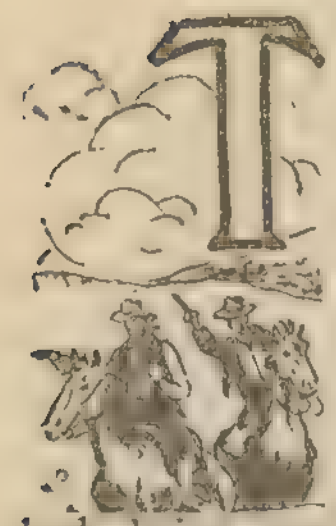
The little man dropped his voice a notch. "Blacky Forell. And he ain't exactly a small potato in this pueblo; he's got important business he'd like to parley with you, Lindsay."

"That so?"

"Yes....Don't listen to that Vigil-

ante bunch. They only pay small dinero. Blacky deals in the *blue* chips. Blacky Forell. He's waiting...."

6



THEY LEFT by a side entrance, went down to the corner and turned up one of the branching roads. Red Cully felt the sweat oozing from the palms of his hands. This could be a trap. There was always the danger of somebody being around who knew the real Big Red Lindsay, the man Stach said was south of the Line in Mexico. Then Red grew calm as he put a fresh-rolled tube of Durham between his long lips. After all, he had nothing to lose. He was marked a killer branded for a hangrope if they ever caught him, anyhow.

The little man snapped a match to Cully's quirly, flipped it away past a tree in the thick darkness away from the glare of the coal-oil torches of the main line. Red saw a figure shift behind the tree, and got a glimpse of the big unblinking eyes of the one-armed man. Red's right hand froze over his gun butt on that side.

But the little gent with him said "Howdy" to One Arm and the latter grunted something in return. Nothing else happened. As they moved on, Red Cully kept cutting eyes over his shoulder. But he saw no further sign of One Arm. They came to a little eating place with a low lamp burning back from the window. The little gent opened the door.

Red said, as he flipped out a hogleg and stuck inside his waistband, "You go first, mister."

The little man looked hurt. "You're among friends, Lindsay." But he nodded and walked in first, walked down toward a back table where three men sat over mugs of java. One of them got up, too casually, and sauntered over to the other side of the restaurant. The other, Red noted, dropped his hands under the table after hurriedly lowering his cup. The third one, he knew at once, was this Blacky Forell, leader of the big gang in Succara. The man he'd heard Stach mention when he was trapped under that cot back in the settlement.

"Blacky" was a misnomer for the man. He should have been called "Parson" Forell. He was small, delicately built, dressed in a blue serge business suit. The brown sombrero over it seemed to dwarf him, giving him a deceptively harmless look. But Red, stalking slowly down toward the back table, wasn't deceived; Forell had a small mean mouth, vicious in its tight-lippedness. His pale hands on the checkered table cloth, with their constantly twitching fingers, were like claws; and his white-skinned cadaverous face, though almost sanctimonious at a casual first glance, was the face of a man who could kill coldly to get what he wanted, Red realized.

"Howdy, Lindsay," Forell greeted him in a soft voice. "Light and have a cup of java, some grub too if you wish. I'm Forell." A smile creased his face around the soft eyes. The blue-black hair of his uncovered head was like something painted on. Despite his mild soft manner, he would be sharp as a four-footed lobo on the prowl, Red realized.

He sat down, shook his head when Forell asked him again to have something. "They said you wanted to talk some business, Forell."

Blacky Forell nodded and leaned across the table. His small hands were clasped, but Red could feel that those restless fingers were twitching, inside the palms. Forell said: "Lindsay, you're a top gunhand; you've tamed some of the saltiest towns—for a price. I'm willing to offer good dinero."

Red said disinterestedly, "For what? I never been anybody's hired killer; and they tell me they's a new layout here that's going to rod Succara straight and lawful."

Forell cocked a cynical eyebrow. "That's what they say. Sure. But the man heading the new deal is a mangy crook of a card sharp, a gambling house king. A gent you wouldn't

trust as far as you could spit. As for the Vigilantes—" He sneered with a significant jerk of his head.

Red Cully blew out quirly smoke. "I'd heard the Vilgilantes were getting plumb strong here. And that they wanted to hired a crack trigger slammer or two to back their play."

Forell looked around at his men, smiling, as if this Red Lindsay's alleged information was downright ridiculous. "And what can the Vilgilantes offer. Five hundred to a man to clean it up—to take his life in his hands every moment of the day. And to make the play practically alone."

RED MADE no comment, simply looking down at his long powerful hands. Blacky Forell extracted a tailor-made smoke from a package, put it between his thin lips with a certain daintiness. As he lighted it, the gunman at the table said:

"Blacky, you said you wasn't going to smoke but one after dinner. That's your second brain pill."

Blacky Forell smiled faintly. "'S right, Chuck. But I got a heap on my mind tonight." He cut his eyes back to Red. "Lindsay, I can offer you dinero, real dinero to side me. All you got to do is name your price. And—you won't have to play it alone."

"Name my price for what?" Red asked. "You want somebody's light put out, I reckon.... I don't play that way, Forell."

Blacky Forell shook his head. "I don't want nobody killed, but I aim to be protected against this new brand of law Succara's got. I want to hire you afore somebody hires you against me. See?" He smiled disarmingly. "I don't want to have Big Red Lindsay against me."

"I don't know," Red stalled.

"Look, Lindsay. Work for the Vigilantes and you'll be playing a lone hand. But join my payroll, and you'll be backed all the way. I got my own little bunch. And I got three gents I brought in—three gents you've probably heard about. Gunner Smiggs, for one. Tough as a stove-dried boot. You know who he is, I reckon."

Red nodded; he had heard stories of Smiggs. A man who walked on the thin edge between the Law and outlawry. Who hired out his guns but always managed to cover himself at the payoff.

"And Rigney," Forell went on. "Spot Rigney up from the Llanos Estacados. A very rough customer if you buck him, Lindsay. And I also got Joe Fenner. Another bad gent to buck. Bat Masterson once said he never knew a man who could clear a gun from holster leather as fast as Fenner.... Those men would be on your side, backing you, any time trouble came, Lindsay."

"I got to think it over," Red said.

"Sure, sure. I'll be here for quite a spell tonight. And even when I'm not here, they'll be somebody around who can reach me." He winked at the gun guard at the table with them. "My offer'd be be a cool thousand, Lindsay, till things are settled here. It won't take long. And maybe you wouldn't have to do nothing."

"I'll see," Red said, rising.

Forell's smile disappeared for a moment. "Mebbe that Lucky Selvin the gambling house boss might offer you more. But watch him, Lindsay; he's got a bad reputation for not paying off."

After a few more words, Red Cully left. He went back down to the main drag, turned to his right, away from the Central House where Stach Speyer would be. He went along the street a way, drifted in beside a wagon in an empty lot where a travelling patent medicine salesman was giving an oration about the properties of the wonderful snake oil he dispensed. To hear the salesman tell it, this stuff would cure about everything from an aching tooth to a broken neck. A few minutes later, Red slipped across the road, stepped into the mouth of an alley beside a closed-up barber shop. He wanted to see if Blacky Forell was having him trailed.

But apparently Forell wasn't. Red moved down to the big Central House with its double gallery, eased in a side entrance. He went up to the third floor and located Room 318 down at end of the hall where a wing ran

rearward. He was about to rap on the door when he caught the voices from inside, saw that the door had slipped its latch and was ajar a fraction of an inch.

There was a woman's voice, then a man's, Speyer's. She said: "You will enforce the Law, Stach? You will play it straight, won't you?"

Stach's voice came out to Red: "Yes, my darling. I—I will play it straight. Straight! I swear it...."

Red Cully stood there, puzzled. Then a voice from behind said, "Looking for the boss, Red?" It was the raw-boned Willkins, gun hanging too carelessly alongside his leg, in a doorway of a room across the hall. "Hey, Stach!" he called out. "Red's back."

STACH CALLED to come in and Red pushed the door open and stepped into the sitting room of the hotel suite Speyer had. Then he brought himself up short. The black-haired woman of the dancehall was there. And Stach, just taking his arms from around her, was saying: "Red, I want you to meet Miss Johnie Drews. Johnie, this is Red Cully, now know in these parts as Big Red Lindsay. One of my boys."

Red pulled off his new sombrero, said, "Howdy, ma'm." Made a slight bow. The girl he'd admired at the Silver Moon Dancehall. He saw her thoughtful eyes size him up; they became suddenly guarded and she involuntarily drew back half a step from him. It was the gesture of a person who feels drawn instinctively to another, but remains cautious.

"How do you do, Mr. Cully," she said, cold-voiced. She turned her back to go over to the table and pick up her gloves.

Stach Speyer was grinning away. "Red's the man who is going to help me rod the Law in this town, Johnie."

And Red said to himself, hating Stach Speyer then, "you dirty low-down dog—to lie to her...."

7

STACH poured a drink for Red, offered Johnie one. She shook her head. Stach asked Red what his news was.

"Forell was the one who made the move you expected," Red Cully said looking down at the drink he held as he lounged against a chest of drawers. He could feel the woman's eyes on him; and he didn't dare look at her lest he reveal his feelings. Now it was as if that Tess back home had never existed. Never before had he encountered a woman such as this Johnie Drews.

"Tell me," Stach repeated, frowning at being kept waiting.

Red told him. "He's afraid of what you aim to do, Stach," he ended it up. "He's got himself a gunman spread; and he still wants to hire me, the man he thinks is Big Red Lindsay. It's pretty plain." He named the three gun slicks Forell had mentioned to him. Gunner Smiggs. Spot Rigney. And Fenner.

Stach emptied his fresh drink, drew hard on his cigaret and hummed a little tune. "And that Fenner really is fast. I saw him once when I was down in Old Mex. Awful fast." He walked halfway across the room, then back. "Forell's got one hell of a bunch to buck....well, there's my old motto. When you can't whip 'em—join 'em That's what I'll do. Join up with 'em. anyway."

Johnie's eyes widened in alarm. "Stach, Forell's a crook, a killer. He heads a gang that—"

He touched her arm, puckered eyes bespeaking the shrewd workings of his brain. "Sure, honey, I know. And there are a heap of others in this town. But I can't buck'em all at once; I'll use Blacky Forell till I get stronger than he is."

He wheeled around to Red. "Red,

go back to Blacky. Tell him—let's see.... Yes, tell him you accept his offer, that you'll ride along when you please. Blacky's big idea is to hire you so he won't have you against him.... Go back there; talk to him; then wait. Willkins will be dropping in on him with an invitation to visit me." He chuckled. "Forell'll never have to know you're siding me—till it's too late for him to do anything about it."

Red left the hotel and went back past the boisterous bars and honky tonks, thinking about Stach Speyer; thinking about what a slick-as-slobbers natural-born double crosser he was. Red speculated on when his own time would come, when Speyer would consider it ripe to stick the knife in his back.

PARSONLIKE FORELL was still at the little eating place when Red returned, still sipping java. He took it black as sin, Red noted. He said: "All right, Forell; she's a deal. I'm sitting in on your side. For a thousand—at the payoff." And, thinking of that woman, Johnie, he despised himself even as he said it. It put himself in the same class as Stach, a double-crosser.

Forell jumped up and grasped his hand. "That's good, Lindsay, danged good. You won't be a-playing on the losing side, I can promise you. There's due to be a showdown here right pronto. That Speyer's playing some kind of a game. And he ain't the breed who ever let the grass sprout under his boots. Have some java."

Red accepted that time, remembering Stach's instructions. He drank his coffee and let Forell talk. Though his face didn't betray it, the unspoken thoughts behind his words did. He was worried about how Speyer, the allegedly reformed gambling house boss, would strike.

"He didn't go out personal, himself, and bring in the late marshal's slayers for nothing." The soft eyes narrowed. "He beat me on that hand, though. I thought I—my boys, anyway—would bring 'em in."

That, Red realized, was an admission that it was Forell's men who'd tried to ambush Stach and his gunhands down from the cabin where the Barron brothers had been found. That they'd killed one and captured Toby, then moved back down the creek to intercept Stach Speyer as he moved in. But the fact interested the fugitive from Red Sands little at the moment. He kept thinking of the woman, Johnie Drews, and how she believed in Speyer. And hating himself for sitting in on this dirty game.

I could ride out, he thought. *I got an outfit, some dinero in my britches and....* Then he remembered that posse that would be scouring the country for him. Remembered what it was to be running, running like an animal with the pack on his heels. He picked up his cup again. He'd stay, he knew. Stay for a spell anyway where he was safe so long as Stach wore the law badge and was top man.

He looked over the top of his cup to see the one-armed man with the direct staring eyes and the face like a graven mask. One-Arm stood outside in the night, looking in the doorway. He nodded slightly. Blacky Forell lifted a hand in recognition. Red Cully held his breath. Then One-Arm moved off, a hand caressing the holster on his right thigh. And Red remembered that he was duded out in his new resplendent rig, shaven and cleaned up, a far cry from the haggard dirty fugitive One-Arm had seen but briefly under the moon during the fight up the creek. One-Arm, naturally, had not recognized him.

DOWN BY the edge of the main town, a train whistled as it chugged off down the valley. As if in answer to it there was another slow peal of thunder from the northwest that sounded like lazy cannon fire. But as yet no rain had fallen. Then Willkins stalked in. Chuck, sitting at the table with them, dropped a hand to a gun. The two men standing over in the other corner stiffened. Forell himself slowly rubbed the lapel of his blue serge business suit.

But Willkins just smiled thinly as he advanced, hands swinging well clear of his hardware. "Coming on a

peaceful mission, Blacky," he announced in that scratchy voice. "The boss would like to have a little parley with you up at the hotel."

"The boss?" Forell said, feigning puzzlement. He glanced around at his men. "Some folks call me the boss around here."

Willkins shrugged. "You know who I mean. Stach says it'd be to your advantage to have a drink with him."

"All right.... I'll drop around right soon." When Willkins had left, he went over to a door in the back corner of the eating place. It gave onto a stairs. He called up. Muffled voices answered from above. "Just you, Smiggs. That'll be enough."

"I'll git my boots on," the gent said from above. A couple of minutes later he came slumping down, knuckling the shuteye from his eyes. He was a medium-sized man in a rundown outfit with a stupid-looking horse-jawed face, dull eyes. He might have been a rundown cowhand, this Gunner Smiggs, as far as appearance was concerned. But Red saw the notches carved in the walnut grips of his two guns. Forell introduced them: "Lindsay'll be stringing on our side when and if trouble comes, Gunner," he said.

Smiggs the gunfighter nodded. "You lost weight, Lindsay."

Red took a deep breath. This was the test, a man who'd known or seen Big Red Lindsay sometime in the past. He forced a smile. "A gent will do that—when he has to move around fast sometimes."

"Sure," agreed Smiggs, muddy eyes a little too amiable. "Like that night in Alamagordo Junction."

Red remembered the side door of the place beyond the table behind him; he took a gamble, shaking his head. "I don't remember any night there."

The false geniality left the gunfighter's face. "You're right, by grab. That was Billy Richards, the ex-U.S. marshal there—not you." He offered the sack of Bull he'd pulled out. It had been a test question because, for a moment, the gunman had doubted his identity as Lindsay.

Red breathed easier when they went out, he, Blacky Forell, with Smiggs and the short Chuck bringing up the rear. Going down the side street, Red said to Blacky: "Mebbe you'd like to withdraw your offer, Blacky. I mean, about hiring me. Because I'll have to play it my own way, coming and going when I please; I always do it that way."

Forell nodded. "'S all right. Mebbe might even look better if folks in general didn't know you were backing any play I made.... That Stach, the dirty snake, I got to watch him," he added in an undertone.

THEY GOT to the Central House, up to Room 318. Stach Speyer greeted Blacky cordially, standing with his coat off, his gunbelt and Colts in plain sight over on the wide window sill. But Red noted the sombrero over on the table beside the lamp. It hadn't been there before, that hat, he recalled because he'd seen the table when Johnie had gone to it, turning away from him, to get her gloves. Stach had a gun under that hat, Red knew instinctively.

"Howdy, Blackie, howdy. Come right in and light," Stach sang out. "Gents like you and me—real powers in this town—ought to get together more often. Come in!" He pumped Blacky's hand heartily.

Blacky smiled in a sleek way. "Now, Stach, you sure ain't wrong there. Nope, that sure makes sense. Say, you've lost weight, ain't you. You sure look good, marshal."

Stach's chest lifted a little at that "marshal." He told Blacky he looked right fine himself. Then he told Willkins, standing over by the door to the bedroom, to set up drinks all around. The two bosses sat down, keeping up the meaningless hypocritical talk. Glasses were lifted.

"To the success of us both, Blacky," Speyer toasted. "Things're going to be changed in this pueblo. Men like you and me'll always stay plumb on top though."

"I hope so." Blacky Forell just barely put his lips to his drink, then set it down and never touched it again. Thunder, closer now, boomed in the night sky. "You closed the Big Ten, I see, Stach. You really mean to clean up Succara? You really got religion?"

Stach Speyer nodded. Forell leaned forward.

"Stach," he said, "you amaze me. You've always been a man to go after a fast dollar—and jump for the big jackpot. And the hell with the means. I ain't denying that I've played it the same way myself. Now—"

"Law and order is coming to Succara; disorder and violence and bloodshed have got to go," Stach said solemnly.

Blacky Forell's mouth tautened. "Mebbe....Mebbe....But I don't see how a smart pelican like you can make dinero out of that, Stach."

The gambler winked. "That's why I wanted to talk with you, Blacky. They's a heap to be made—if *we* play this thing right. Smart and—" Another crash of thunder drowned out his final word.

"'We'?" Blackie picked him up.

Stach looked up at the pair, Smiggs and the man known as Chuck, with Forell. Forell said they could be trusted to keep their mouths buttoned up.

"All right," Stach went on. "Yes, 'we', Blackie. You and me, playing it together, can run this town. Run it just like we please. And we can take plenty out of it." He exhaled a cloud of quirly smoke, the light-hued eyes smiling wisely.

"I'm listening," Blackie said.

"I clean it up. You back my play—under cover, of course. We drive out the others, like Lucky Selvin. And the small fry, the two-bit law breakers, the tinhorn gunmen, the saloon toughs. In the name of the Law, convicting 'em, if necessary."

"Selvin wouldn't be easy. He's got backing—and plenty of guns behind him too." But there was a new note in his mild voice; he was interested. "There's the Pop Waters bunch over in Whisky Row, too. And there's a big potato or two who ain't known to be working outside the Law. There—and Judge Rosser ain't going to be on your side, Stach; he craved to be marshal."

"I know. But they's ways of handling them all—crooked ways if we can't break them in any other way. Sabe?"

"Where does the dinero come in, Stach?"

"We'll have to do something about Jarris and his Running-J outfit too. That rustling polecat has power in this piece of country."

"The dinero?" Blacky said again.

Stach took a long slow drink before replying. "The dinero? Oh, yes. Blacky, in running 'em out, in breaking 'em, we grab what they got. Like Lucky Selvin. He keeps plenty of dinero in his joint. And he owns the place as well. When he's forced to quit...."

Blackie's eyes glittered as he got the idea.

"And when we got the lawless element corraled or run out, then, Blackie, we got the whole game for ourselves. We run the works—with no competitors. We're top dogs. We take this town for all its got—you and me.... Hope I don't have to make it no plainer with rough words, Blackie."

The thunder rumbled across the night again. Right after it, there was a sound from up the road like a gunshot. Willkins looked out the window. Said it was probably just some orey-eyed coot. A new roll of thunder followed right atop it. The two leaders sat there in an atmosphere that had become tense and heavy. Blackie Forell brought out a silken bandanna and neatly wiped his pale forehead. Then he nodded. "Stach, I always knew you was plumb slick. It's a deal!"

They shook hands. Somebody bellowed above the general hubbub of Succara's night life down the road. Stach said, both of them standing now, smiling into each other' face, "I rod the Law. You work with me—under cover. We clean up Succara. Then we have it to run together—as partners."

"As partners!" Blacky repeated warmly. They shook again.

And, looking on, Red Cully knew each would sell out the other as quick as he'd kill a snake. That both, either Stach Speyer or Blacky Forell, would put the knife between the other's shoulder blades at the first promising opportunity.

Steve, the stocky bodyguard who'd been with Speyer when Red had first

encountered the ex-gambler back in that settlement, burst into the room. Simultaneously, as another thunder clap waned, there was the sound of firing from up the main line.

"Boss," Steve cried. "there's been trouble at The Pinto bar. A gunning. One of Sam Jarris' cowhands put lead in a gent." He told the rest of it, gasping from running. Jarris himself was there with some others of his wire-tough spread. They'd run down to the livery barn and were saddling up, with the man who'd done the shooting, to bust out. "They's a crowd at the head of the livery barn alley, Boss. They're plumb ornery. But that Jarris will smoke his way clear, if he has to, like that time last spring."

Stach Speyer, new marshal of Succara, quickly buckled on his gunbelt, grabbed up the sombrero from the table, revealing the hideout Colts he'd forgotten now that he'd placed under it. He smiled at Blacky.

"Jarris, eh.... Playing right into our hands, eh, Blacky?"

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THEY WENT out and headed up the line. Blacky Forell said something to Chuck and Gunner Smiggs. The latter two turned up the side road. Marshal's star glinting on his shirt, Speyer strode along, backed by Willkins, Steve and Red Cully. The Pinto Saloon was a narrow second-rate place on the left side of the road. Down a few doors from it was the alley leading to the livery stable. A crowd gathered at the head of it bellied out into the road in the glow of the coal oil torches from the barrooms and honky tonks along the line.

"Make way for the marshal!" bawled Willkins. And the crowd opened up an alley through which Stach Speyer imperiously strode.

He got to the front end of it to look down at the barn. In the light from the partially opened door about half a dozen men stood. One, a fat bull-shouldered gent in a crimson shirt, a trifle unsteady on his feet, was Sam Jarris, owner of the Running-J, one of the powerful cow outfits up the valley. It was evident he'd had more than a few drinks. He glared at the bunch, some men with drawn weapons, blocking the head of the alley. His face was inflamed with redeye and temper. "Git the hell outa there! Clear the way!" he bawled in the voice of a man not used to brooking interference.

Ridger, the banker, black frock coat buttoned tightly over his paunch, called to Speyer in a cautious voice from one side. "He's in a plumb mean mood, marshal. Maybe you'd better—"

The new Succara marshal, Stach Speyer, stepped out in front of the throng. Red had to admire the gambler's nerve then. The latter levelled an arm at the arrogant Jarris.

"Mr. Jarris, one of your cowhands, according to my information, shot another man just now," Stach said clearly and calmly. "In the name of the Law, I demand you turn him over to me till proper investigation can be made."

"It's Joe Carny," somebody in the crowd called to Stach.

"Name of the Law?" Jarris spat on the ground, than tacked on some obscenities. "What the hell Law? Who in tarnation are *you*, anyway, 'cept a two-bit cheat of a dirty card sharp! You can't change a polecat just by pinning a badge to his chest, by grab!"

He was roaring, a man half locoed with rage. "We're pulling out and Gawd help any damfools who try to stop us!" He gripped two white-handled Colts. Around him five-six of his spread stood, their weapons bared too, bleak-faced sneering-eyed men. Jarris was known to have a mean spread, to have gents on his payroll at fancy wages because they were far better at the business of slamming a trigger than they were with a throw rope.

"You can't defy the Law, Jarris. Use some sense," Stach told him

still even-voiced. "If your man was justified, he has nothing to worry about. But the Law—"

Jarris kicked dirt angrily and spat onto the ground again. Blacky Forell moved up casually behind the marshal. Red heard him say: "Stall a coupla minutes, Stach. My boys'll be coming. I'll have 'em slip up through the feed lot behind the barn and jump 'em from the rear. Jarris means to scrap it out—otherwise." He glided away.

Jarris trumpheted, "Carny put some lead into a barroom rat who had a horn a-drooping for trouble! That's all. There ain't no decent respectable Law in this pueblo that I recognize now. Sabe? When a cold-decking tinhorn, one step removed from a hoss-thief, rods the Law, that Law don't mean nothing to me no more." He turned and put a foot in the stirrup. "We're a-heading home now, mister. Git clear! We're a-coming, come hell or highwater!"

The throng scurried back clear. Most of them had lost their belly for a fight now that they saw the savage Jarris meant business. They had no faith in the ability of the Law to deal with the rustling ranch-owner if he did start gunplay. Behind him his men were swinging into the saddle.

"Better get your hammers cocked, boys," Stach said coolly to the three with him. "It smells like trouble for sure." He even managed a slight smile. "Jarris," he called down the alley as the first slow drops of rain slanted down, making a spitting sound on the tin roof of the building adjoining the alley, "we don't want no trouble. Show some sense and avoid bloodshed."

Swung into a gunman's stance, legs wide, a few feet over from Stach Speyer, Red had to admit a sneaking admiration for the man again. Perhaps he was a lowdown rat, a man who couldn't deal them straight; but the ex-gambler did possess a heap of cold raw nerve.

Jarris levelled his guns before him as he sat in the saddle, scowling up the alley. "Try using some sense yourself, gambler, or you'll be dealing 'em up in Boothill. We're coming out."

It was a grisly moment. Red Cully could feel the sweat drops creeping down his backbone under his shirt. Just he himself and Stach and Willkins and Steve. Against Jarris with six gunfighters, who masqueraded as cowhands, behind him.

"Jarris will pay for this—regardless of what happens here," Red heard Stach say half to himself in a whisper.

The Running-J men were walking their ponies toward the outlet. Red's hands tightened around the gun butts he gripped. Then some fool back in the shadows on the other side of the road fired a high shot into the alley. There was immediate reaction. Two guns in the Jarris bunch kicked out muzzle flame. Red heard a sharp cry of pain from Steve. Then, from the corner of his eye, saw Stach's short-set gun guard hobble up the sidewalk away from the alley entrance, hit in the leg. That left three of them.

"All right!" Jarris bellowed. "Rush 'em!"

Red saw him start to throw the spur steel home to the big pinto he sat. For a split second, the fugitive from Red Sands knew the old mongrel-like fear that had grown in him since that girl had thrown him over. The temptation to cut and run, to eat crow like a coward, almost overwhelmed him. He didn't know what kept him there, what made him do what he did. Except perhaps it was that Stach Speyer, over to the left and a little in front of him, still held his ground. And Red stayed too, calmly shot twice at the leader, Sam Jarris.

One of Red's slugs took him through shoulder flesh. The burly ranchman went up stiff-legged in the saddle, almost knocked out of it by the impact of the slug that passed through his flesh. His right arm dropped limply, releasing the gun in that hand. With the other, he sawed on the reins and pulled the pinto half around.

IT WAS only for a matter of moments. But it halted the charge as he and his cayuse blocked the path of the riders behind him. Then, headed by Gunner Smiggs, Forell's men—ten of them—burst from the barn behind the Running-J bunch. A bullet vented the hat crown of one of the latter. More lead droned just past their heads. Then Smiggs was yelling.

"Hoist them dewclaws! Grab a hunk of sky, gents!"

Dumbfounded, Jarris himself wrenched around in the kak. "What the hell is this?" He recognized some of Blacky Forell's regular men. "Are you chunkheads locoed?"

"Eddie Sorle," Smiggs answered through smoke from his gun muzzle, naming the shot-up gent in the whiskey mill, "is a friend of my boss. I got my orders. You going to turn Carny over to the Law, mister?"

Big-chested Sam Jarris reminded Red Cully of a bruised, stepped-on snake as he writhed in the kak, writhed with a mixture of pain and frustration. His head swivelled from Smiggs back to Marshal Stach Speyer. His face was pure venom incarnate. Finally he thumbed at a hard-bitten gent with a cast in one eye who sat in the center of his riders.

"Better go along, Carny," he said hoarsely. "I'll see that you git off free all right, all right." Then he slanted another stream of tobacco juice groundward. When Jarris spat it was like another man cursing. "Come on, boys," he said to the others; they left Carny behind as they rode out of the livery barn alley.

They took Carny down to the jailhouse, put the sullen half-orey-eyed cowhand in a second floor cell. He claimed self defense, said he and Sorle had gotten into a ruckus and that the latter had gone for a holster first. Then the wounded man, unconscious, was toted down from the saloon on a door. He'd been shot in the side and a second bullet had raked the side of his head. A sawbones arrived and went right to work in the big jailhouse office. Half an hour later, patched up, the slug removed from his side, but still unconscious, Sorle was removed to a bedroom used by the deputies in the rear of the dobie structure.

"Cain't say as whether he'll pull through or not," the sawbones said in reply to Speyer's query. "He ain't young, and he's drunk half the time. Cain't say." He picked up his bag and stovepipe hat.

When he'd left, Stach, Red beside him, stood looking down at the wasted form of the gray-haired man who'd been shot up. "It wouldn't be the worst thing if the little rat did die," Stach muttered. "Then I could really make it hot for Sam Jarris."

Red, almost recoiling, knew then how cold-blooded Stach Speyer could be....

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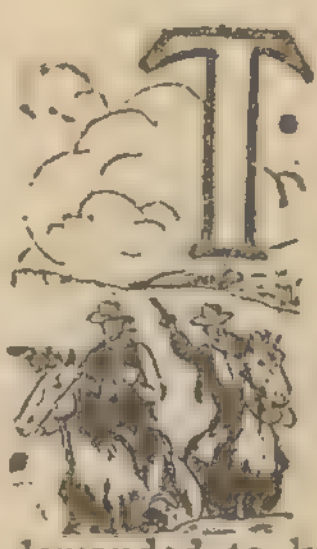

THE next morning, a lawyer sent by Sam Jarris called at the jailhouse where Red and Stach had slept. Sorle was still unconscious. The lawyer was a little, pigeon-breasted man with gold-rimmed spectacles and a haughty manner. He demanded to know on what charges Jarris' cowhand was being held. The ex-gambler marshal patted down an after-breakfast yawn as he sat with his feet on the office desk. Smiled enigmatically. "Might call it as a—a material witness, I guess you'd say, my friend," he said.

The attorney started to rant. His client was a powerful man in this piece of country, with political influence at the State capital too. It wasn't legal to hold a man like that without any formal charge. "I'll see Judge Rosser and get him to call a court session and—"

"The judge is out of town," Stach said, inhaling on his first cigaret puff of the day. "Left last evening to see his sick brother in Yellow Pine. If he was here, I'd be charging that Toby Barron upstairs with murder

and arranging for trial. Why don't you go out, dump down a coupla stiff drinks and forget the whole thing, my friend?"

The little legal man drew himself up indignantly. "You can't hold Carny!" he screeched.

Both Red and Stach smiled. Then Stach snapped impatiently, "The doc doesn't know yet whether the victim, Eddie Sorle, will live or die. Till we do know, at least, I'm holding Jarris' man on an open charge. And *I* am the Law in this town. You want to argue about that?"

The lawyer tromped out. "Sam Jarris won't take this lying down," he called back over his shoulder.

Stach chuckled. He didn't figure he had to worry. The solid citizens of the town were staunchly behind him after last night. Red Cully had already been out and circulating around to pick up the reaction. Folks had practically forgotten those gunmen of Blacky Forell's who'd jumped Jarris from behind; most of them had never realized it was the alleged Red Lindsay, Red Cully, who'd sided the new marshal at the head of the alley. What they remembered, what impressed them was that the ex-gambler who'd become law boss, whose intentions had been suspected by many, had stepped in courageously to uphold the Law. Had called the dangerous Sam Jarris for a showdown.

"First Speyer goes out and grabs the murderers of the old marshal, the Barron brothers. And now he makes Jarris eat crow and slaps one of his gun toughs behind the bars. I say Stach is all right, by grab!" That was the concensus of opinion. The ex-gambler rated big.

Red watched Stach sitting there now in the swivel chair behind the desk, finger tips and thumbs of each hand touching so they formed a church steeple beneath his chin. Stach was thinking hard, trying to cook a plan.

"I got to keep showing 'em action," he muttered. "They'll expect that from me now. More than ever.... The big clean-up of Succara. I don't know, I don't know. The townspeople'll want this pueblo church-pure."

RED SAID nothing as he leaned against the back wall of the office, drawing on a tube of Durham. He was thinking of late last night, when all the ruckus was over. How Johnie from the dancehall had come to the back door of the jailhouse, asking for Stach. And when Stach had gone back there, how her arms had gone around his neck. How she'd clung to the gambling king, speaking in a voice husky with emotion. "You might have been burnt down, Stach.... Oh, you might have been burnt down."

"You asked me to play it straight and uphold the Law, didn't you, Johnie?" Stach had come back.

Red had hated him then, hated him as a hypocritical snake who, as he knew from Stach's own words, was embarked on a deep huge scheme of double-cross. Red didn't realize he was jealous; all he knew, even now, was that he hated this slick gent who sat fingering his black mustache.

There was another thing too. Temporarily, at least, he had lost that craven feeling, that deep doglike fear, the feeling that he would back water and eat crow if called in a showdown. And he had lived with the knowledge that he would, had lived that way for months since that Tess had played him for a fool. But since the test last night in the livery barn alley, where he'd held his ground because Stach did, he'd recovered some of his manhood. Early this morning, as he lay on his cot after awakening, he'd even speculated on taking the chance of bucking this double-crossing snake, Stach Speyer, when the big hand came, when the ex-gambler tried to rake in the jackpot.

The hunch-backed jailor clumped into the office. Toby Barron, upstairs, he said, wanted a pint of red-eye. Had given him money for it. Stach shrugged and said to let him have it. He was locked up in his own thoughts, in his planning. Then Willkins stepped in the front door and stood blocking it, hand on a gun butt. "Lucky Selvin'd like to see you, boss."

Stach came alive quickly, swinging his legs off the desk. He gave a sig-

nal to Red. The latter understood. Selvin, he recalled, had been Stach's rival as king of the top gambling emporium in Succara, a man Stach had planned to break in his new mock campaign to clean up the town. And Red, posing as Big Red Lindsay, was not supposed to be a crony of Stach's. Red stepped into the hallway that ran to the rear and pushed the door almost closed, but not before he'd seen Stach button up his vest after checking on a derringer in an inside pocket. Then edge open a drawer of the desk where a Colts .45 lay under a carelessly strewn bandanna.

"Sure, send him in," Stach told Willkins.

Willkins stood aside, spoke over his shoulder. Lucky Selvin, who'd been blocked off, came in, a tall, slim languid-moving man. He was the picture of the typical Western gambler, sleek, immaculate, handsome, with blond hair and a thin line of mustache, long sideburns, a pearl stickpin in his expensive black cravat. He carried a pair of brand-new white buckskin gloves and diamond rings glistened on his fingers. They almost matched the glisten of his custom-made boots. He wore a stovepipe hat at a jaunty angle. He was a man in his early thirties. But his eyes were dead glassy things, old before their time, always on guard. He sneered.

"Right nice of you to drop around, Lucky," Stach told him with well-feigned cordiality. "Sit down, sit down."

Lucky Selvin surveyed the dust-grayed chair at the side of the desk nearer to him, sneered more broadly with a curl of his red mouth, then placed a boot on it fastidiously. "I got that note you sent me by—him, Willkins." Selvin flipped his grasped gloves negligently over a shoulder to indicate Willkins.

"My chief deputy, you mean," Stach corrected him stiffly.

Selvin laughed coldly. "Ain't we got real pretty names for things now, though?.... Listen, *Marshal* Speyer, you can go chase the devil as far as what you said in that note goes!" His voice became like a whiplash. "You don't own this town—yet. You were just appointed to run the Law in it."

Behind the door into the back hall, Red Cully eased one gun looser in the holster. This sounded like trouble a-brewing. Out of his left eye he watched the scene around the edge of the ajar door. But Stach Speyer refused to be baited, answering suavely and coolly: "My note was just a suggestion, Lucky. They's going to be Law in Succara. We might find it wise to shut down all the gambling hells and honky tonks unless they clean up.... Just a suggestion."

Selvin went pale with anger. The words came from him with a sibillant s o u n d. "Suggestion? Suggestion? Sure. You just suggested that I padlock my place and get the hell out of town. Do you take me for a fool?"

Red saw Stach smile. "Never been certain on that, Lucky."

SELVIN brought his clasped gloves down over the thigh of the leg propped on the chair. They made a sound like a pistol shot. "Stach Speyer, be careful! Maybe you got religion—but I don't believe it. I can p r o t e c t myself. And—I'm—not—getting—out—of—town! M a k e trouble for me—and find yourself a nice big hole." He stalked out haughtily.

When Red stepped back into the office, Stach was hunched over the desk, playing a tattoo with his fingers. Willkins said he was going to get some grub. Went out. Stach said sotto-voice: "Thought mebbe I could bluff Selvin, that mebbe he'd offer to sell out. He's never been one for a tough showdown fight. But I'll make trouble for him—yet." He stuck a fresh tube of Durham into his mouth. "Jarris is the one, though, who can make the fight really rough. He thinks basically from the point of view of violence; his brains are in his trigger finger. After all, his dad got his start here as a hired gunfighter." He lighted up the smoke, gazed into the flame of the match. "I'd really be able to get tough with him if that danged little rat of a Sorle would only die off."

Red felt his mouth tighten, felt

the old antipathy for Stach rise in him. And then the latter surprised him, seeming to read Red's mind. Stach mused, cocking an eyebrow at Red: "Think I'm a cold-blooded son of a coyote, don't you, Cully? That I'm a blood-thirsty sidewinder." He smiled blandly. "No. But Sorle ain't important, a little no-good drunkard, no family. A barroom bum."

"He's a human being," Red flashed back.

"Questionable," Stach said. "And I've had ponies I admired more than some human critters I've known. A heap more. You're soft-hearted, Red Cully. The kind of a rannyhan who could throw his whole future away over a woman. A gent with ideals, mebbe, even though you've done some gunslinging; but you've got to learn they're times when you can't let anything or anybody stand in your way. That you've got to sacrifice 'em to gain your ends."

"I don't think so," Red said.

Stach snorted. "They'd sell *you* down the river quick enough if the boot was on the other foot, my friend.... Say, hadn't you better drop around and see that rat of a Forell. He thinks he's got you on his payroll, you know." Stach winked.

RED CULLY, known to Succara as Big Red Lindsay, left by the back door of the jailhouse. A high dobie fence that ran around the back yard pretty well kept him from sight. He slipped out the gate in the rear of it, into a stand of cottonwoods. Beyond them was the horseshed belonging to the jail. He passed around that and came to the little dirt path in the rear that meandered out to the side road.

It ran through the rank grass of an empty lot between two houses. Across the street from it was a house an undertaker used as his store. His sign projected from a post of the porch. On it, propped up beside the doorway, was a rough pine coffin. And sitting on the top of the front steps, whittling, was One Arm. His bulbous eyes, his implacable face, they were fixed on Red as he came through the empty lot.

Despite his one arm, he managed to whittle by holding the stick pinched between his knees, shaving at it with a Bowie knife in his right hand. Somehow he looked as if he'd been there forever; yet Red knew his presence was no accident. That, somehow, he was waiting to see him appear from the rear door of the jail. From where he sat on the high steps, One Arm could tell whence Red had come. He just kept moving the blade steadily, unhurriedly, along the stick and looking. Looking.

Red's right hand had flicked down to a holster top at first sight of him. Immediately he knew it was a mistake, a give-away move, the reaction of a man guilty of something. For a brief moment he was on the verge of walking across and demanding to know of One Arm why he'd thrown that shot at him in Big Rosie's the first day he'd come to Succara. Then he knew it would be useless; he couldn't prove anything. The iron-faced hombre would undoubtedly deny all knowledge of it. And he knew now that Red had come out of the jail.

Red turned and strode up toward the main line. Behind him, One Arm whistled some kind of a march tune in time to his step....

10

BLACKY Forell was drinking java in that eating place, which Stach had told Red that Blacky owned, as Red dropped in. Blacky was an inveterate coffee drinker though never doing more than taking a single sip of liquor. Red sat down and Forell asked him where he'd spent the night.

Red figured fast. Forell probably knew the truth. "At the jailhouse," he said. "That Stach fella asked me to stay if I wanted to. Inasmuch as you two gents are partners...." He

lighted up a smoke.

"Partners?" Blacky smiled wisely over the rim of the cup.

"Mebbe you don't want me to hang out around him, eh?" Red said. "I figured—"

"You figured right," Blacky broke in. "Danged right! Lindsay, you're right smart. Stach don't know you're working for me. He won't suspect you, Red. Stick around him a-plenty—so you can keep an eye on the double-crossing snake." His knuckles went white around the handle of his tin cup. "I'll get him afore this thing is finished. I'll trap him, that Stach, if I have to frame something on him. I'll rake in the winnings at the finish—and spit in his teeth.... Have some java, Red."

Red took a cup of coffee, sitting opposite Forell, and realizing what a dirty game he was tied into. Nobody seemed on the level in Succara. Nobody trusted the other man. Stach Speyer was out to double-cross the town, to cash in on the Law and order reign. Blacky smelled something and didn't trust Stach. Stach was hoping Sorle, the gunfight victim, would die so he would have a real club over Sam Jarris the rancher. And Stach would sell out or cut down anybody when it came to his advantage, Red knew. The whole thing made the fugitive from Red Sands feel as if he'd swallowed ashes.

But then he remembered he was safe while Stach Speyer ran the Law here. That he would not have to cut and run for a spell.

"Things are going to bust here," Blacky was saying. "Stach has to clamp down pronto and hard—strike afore they get time to buck back at him. Coyotes don't let go of their meat easy. There's even been some rumors that special investigators from the State capital are headed this way. Oh well, they can't hang any deadwood on me."

Red thought of that one-armed gent who'd watched him come from the jailhouse. He spoke to Blacky, remembering that the latter had recognized and greeted the one-armed man when he'd appeared in the doorway of this place at night.

"Blacky, mebbe I should warn you. After all, I'm working for you. I'm supposed to be a stranger in these parts, but a certain jasper has been watching me." He decided not to mention the shot One Arm had taken at him. After all, he wasn't posing as the alleged Lindsay when that happened.

"Yes, Red?"

"A one-armed gent. Big. Hard-faced. He was outside the night I came to talk to you here.... You seemed to know him."

Blacky Forell's eyes lidded. "Oh, sure. Fortmann. I know who you mean. Don't really know the gent well, of course." He fitted one of those tailor-made cigarets meticulously between his lips. "He's all right. Hanging around here to try to find some snake he aims to kill. Seems the snake killed a saddle pard of his a while back; he's all right." He yelled back to the kitchen, "Hey, let me have some fresh java. And be sure it's hot this time."

A LITTLE later, Red left, mounting the roan stallion he'd picked up from the livery stable. He rode down the side road and out of town, following a trail that followed the course of a little creek. There was the smell of sage on the air and the red willows bordering the water swished softly in the wind. Red inhaled deep, enjoying the clean smell. It was good to get out of that town of rats and liars who were interested only in the double cross.

He gave the powerful stallion its head and a touch of the spur steel and let the animal run till it was lathered. Then he turned back at a lope, thinking some more of the one-armed gent, Fortmann. Wondering if perhaps Fortmann was siding Blacky Forell. Fortmann had spotted him, Red Cully, in the shooting rukus up the creek where the cabin of the Barron brothers was, had picked him out again here in Succara at Big Rosie's place. And Red knew that Fortmann was one man who'd not been tricked by his fancy rig and his passing himself off as Big Red Lindsay the gunman. The fact that he'd been watch-

ing the back of the jailhouse from the porch of the undertaker's place proved that.

"But if he's stringing with Blacky, why hasn't Fortmann tipped him off that I'm an imposter, that I'm one of Stach Speyer's men?" he said aloud, musing in the saddle as the stallion dropped to a walk. "Mebbe he has. Mebbe Blacky knows and is putting me and Stach off guard by pretending to believe I really am Big Red Lindsay. Just *pretending* to believe." He shook his head in a weary gesture, weary trying to figure the set-up in Succara. "This ain't double cross country. It's triple-cross land," he bit off sharply. "It—"

"Do you always talk to yourself, Mr. Lindsay?" It was Johnie Drews, standing under one of the creek-side willows as her pony drank. She wore a dark-green riding habit with black boots, held a white sombrero in one hand. Red's eyes immediately went to the bared head of coiled back hair.

HE SMILED, reining up and dropping from the sadde without quite being conscious of what he was doing. "It's one way of getting a real straight answer—in these parts, leastwise, Miss Johnie," he answered. He moved toward her.

She smiled in return, but her eyes went grave almost at once. "I know. In Succara one doesn't know who to trust." She slapped at the knee-high grass with her braided quirt and Red knew she was thinking of Stach. "I've heard the talk around the dancehall," she went on. "Folks don't even trust the Law. Everybody is suspicious of everybody else."

Red didn't know what prompted him. He said, "Stach showed them he meant business last night, ma'am."

Her down-turned eyes leaped up challengingly. "Then what were Blacky Forell's men doing in on the play then?" She hadn't overlooked a detail the rest of the town had.

Red looked past her onto the creek water shimmering under motes of sunlight that seeped through the willows. "You know Stach made a deal with Blacky." He didn't know why he was defending the ex-gambler. "There are times when—well, when you have to play a game to gain your ends. Stach—he's sworn to uphold the Law, hasn't he?"

With a bold direct gesture you'd expect from a man, she reached out and put an ungloved hand on Red's rangy shoulder. "You think Stach is dealing them straight—for once, Red?"

He looked directly at her then, wanting to hold her very tightly. Her eyes did not seek to evade his. She said, low-voiced: "Somehow, I feel I can trust you, Red Cully. Men in love—like Stach—will lie to a woman, then seek to live up to the lie. And I know this new power is tempting—to Stach. It's hard for a man to change his way of life almost overnight. Answer me, Red? You think Stach...."

He sucked in air. "I work for him, Miss Johnie. And I'd say he has every reason for going straight—now." His look said, plainly enough, that he meant because of having a woman like her. "Stach would be a fool not to."

SHE SMILED faintly. "Thank you, Red. I hope you're right. Stach Speyer could be a big man—not just a wealthy—gambler. I hope you are right." She looked down again. "They'll be trouble, Red. Lots of trouble. Promise me you'll always side him—try to protect him—when it comes.... As long as he's dealing them straight, anyway."

He tried to sound casual though the galling bitterness of jealousy was eating into his heart. "Sure thing, ma'm. Anyway, I work for Stach. As you know, I take his pay. I—"

"*I'm* asking you, Red."

He felt the blood pressing in his temples. He nodded. "All right. I side him—through thick and thin."

"Thanks, Red." Her hand came off his shoulder. And in doing so it brushed against his jaw slowly. Perhaps it was accidental. "Thanks."

He was beyond thinking then. All he realized was that suddenly his arms were around the slim woman, that he had pulled her close against himself. That she was looking

straight up into his face, surprised, yet not seeking to twist away. They kissed....

Afterward, he was standing there as she rode down the trail to Succara. Her words still hung on the air. "I've promised myself to Stach Speyer," she'd said. And he was thinking how soft her mouth had been, and how much he hated Speyer.

He mounted and rode back slowly into town. And he knew that he desired Stach Speyer's woman...

11

THINGS were pretty quiet in town that night. Speyer patrolled it, making the rounds of the whisky mills and honky tonks with Willkins in tow. Chuck, the stocky one, went along with them. And Red trailed unofficially in the rear. There was one ruckus in Selvin's gambling hall that almost became a gunfight but Stach broke it up before it developed.

There was also a knife fight between a breed and a cowhand in one of the cheaper dancehalls. Stach stepped into that too before there was any serious damage. He loaded both men on their ponies, headed them in different directions, and warned them if they were in town when morning came he would jail them. They rode out.

Then, later that night, Blacky Forell held a parley with Stach at the jailhouse, coming in by the back way. Red was there too, arriving the same way. Blacky said they had to make their moves pronto. Stach pulled a sheet from a desk drawer.

"They're already seting this up at the printing office down the line, *The Clarion* shop," he said with his slow smile, mentioning the name of the local weekly paper. "It's a notice on the owners of places here. It gives us the excuse to make any move we want to, Blacky. Take a looksee." Stach laughed coldly. "Tomorrow this handbill will be posted all over town."

Looking over Blacky's shoulder, Red saw what it was: a notice to every owner of a bar or a honky tonk or a gambling joint in the town. A notice informing them they would be held responsible for any and all disorder in their place of business, and that a recurrence of any such disorder would result in the closing down of the place. It was signed, "George Speyer, Town Marshal."

Blacky eyed it then shook his head. "I don't savvy it, Stach; this'll only warn 'em to lay low for a spell."

Stach said no. "Notice the word 'recurrence', my friend. That's the big word, the hidden ace in the statement. Recurrence of trouble. Selvin already had trouble, a near gunfight, in his place tonight."

"Yes?" Blacky said. "Well, then, he'll be extra careful not to—"

"There's where you're short-sighted," Stach Speyer cut in. "There's where you and me hook up. We'll see that he does have more trouble. See? Then I raid the joint and close it up. One of your gun slicks—mebbe two of 'em—will start trouble there. And we slam down the lid on Selvin."

Blacky dropped down on a corner of the marshal's desk. He began to nod. "Stach, you're one danged smart gent. Mebbe I never knew it afore. Sure we can work it easy and slick."

RED STOOD back against the wall and listened to them plan it. Willkins dozed in a chair in a corner, not interested so long as his boss was in the driver's seat and he himself was getting his salary. Red himself was amazed at how coldbloodedly they plotted it. The night after the next, they decided upon. Blacky would send two of his gun toughs into Selvin's place.

"They will prod somebody—some barroom tough—and pick a ruckus," he said confidently. "Throw some lead. Create disorder. Then they'll dust out. And it's your move to step in. I'll be ready to back you, Stach. Simple, isn't it?" Blacky winked over a shoulder at Red. "Isn't it, Lindsay?"

Red nodded. "You two gents sure

have this town in your pockets," Red said. Both men winked again. He realized each one of them thought he owned him, and realized too how vicious their scheme was. But, on the other hand, he'd been in Succara long enough to know that the suave Lucky Selvin had a reputation as a dirty cheat, a cold-decking card sharp. That more than one man had lost his dinero in Selvin's place after being so drugged by loaded drinks that he didn't know what was going on. Stach and Blacky were operating against another coyote; Red could see no sense in exposing his own hide to protect a man like Selvin.

"The gent we got to work on—and soon—is that Sam Jarris," Stach said thoughtfully. "He's the strongest one ...If that Sorle would only kick the bucket." The sawbones had been around to the jail after dinner to see Sorle again. The little wastrel had recovered consciousness. But, from fear, he refused to identify the man who'd put lead in him—Joe Carney of Jarris bunk-house crew. "We got to get Jarris somehow," Stach repeated.

"Oh, don't worry too much about him, Stach," Blacky said. "You're the big potato in this town since bringing in Toby Barron. You and me, we can run things and let Jarris make his move. We'll have this pueblo under our thumb soon. We run out Selvin, then we do the same to Pop Waters and his Whisky Row crew. And then, who is there to challenge us?"

"I know, Blacky. But Jarris is a bitter-ender. He—"

THERE WAS a pounding on the front door of the jail. The two ringleaders exchanged mutually suspicious looks. With the shades pulled at the windows, there was no way of seeing who was outside. It was late, with the main section of the town almost closed down for the night. Stach shifted some papers to reveal a .45 beneath. Blacky, sweeping a gun barrel from a holster, came off the desk and stepped quickly to the entrance of the hallway leading to the rear. Stach gave the nod to the now awakened Willkins. Gun drawn he stepped over and unbarred the door.

It was the gray-haired Asa Holden, head of the Vigilantes. He just put one foot over the doorsill and his head into the office. He was too excited to notice who was there outside of Stach Speyer the marshal.

"Just got word," he cried hurriedly. "Trouble down in Whisky Row. One of Pop Waters' boys got shot up. And Waters and his gunmen are going to hit the warpath down there to get the jasper who did it, Speyer. I'll be getting the Vigilantes out as fast as I can—and down there."

Stach came out of his chair. "Good, good. I'll be hopping right down there pronto with my deputy. We got to head off trouble like that, Holden."

"Be careful, Speyer. Better wait till I get the Vigilantes down. They're tough down there." Then he ducked out.

"Don't worry about me," Stach called, winking to Blacky.

The latter nodded back. "It'll take him time to get his Vigilantes outa their night-shirts. My boys are up at the place. We'll get slamming down there and follow you in, Stach, and start the trouble afore Waters and his bunch can git a-rolling. Together we'll smoke up Whisky Row and drive a heap of the small fry out—or to their graves."

"Sure. It's like a ready-made opportunity for us!" Stach was already buckling on a gunbelt.

"Come on, Red," Blacky called to Red Cully, the hombre he believed he'd hired to be on his side.

They went out and up the side road to the eating place. Almost in a matter of minutes, Blacky and Red and eight gunfighters were swinging down a lane, in the saddle, working around to cross the bulging hummock and head into straggling Whisky Row. Stach was waiting there with Willkins.

"Willkins says Pop Waters and his bunch are down in Big Rosie's place," Stach said.

"All right, Stach. Go in and declare 'em under arrest." He chuckled. "They'll be watching you, proddy

for trouble, a-wondering how much of a bluff you're running on 'em."

"And your outfit will come smashing in the side way, throwing down on 'em?" Stach picked up the idea quickly.

Blacky nodded. "That's it. Let's go. We'll put the fear of Gawd and the Law in their hearts afore this night is over."

Speyer and Willkins and Chuck moved off down the road toward the bar known as Big Rosie's place. Red had gotten Stach's quick guarded signal. He remained behind with Blacky Forell and his gunmen. They rode down the sandy road a little way, then quitted their ponies. Walked around a hovel and got to the yard behind Big Rosie's, then worked up the alley beside it.

"Give 'em all hell when we go in that side door," Forell told his men. "Blast 'em! And—" He paused to take a bandanna from a pocket and put it over the lower half of his face. The dull-eyed Gunner Smiggs did likewise with his neckerchief. The others followed suit. They were all masked save Red himself.

IT REMINDED him of that night of the ambush up on the creek near the Barron brothers' cabin. Red knew, from what Blacky had let drop, that it had been his boys who'd jumped Stach Speyer and his men. Red thought again of how the one-armed gent, Fortmann had been there too. And again he wondered what cards Fortmann was holding in this locoed game, whose side he was sitting in on. Blacky Forell moved to his side. "This Pop Waters is the bird we want to grab off—or burn down, Lindsay," he whispered. "He's a tall half bald gent..." Round-shouldered too, Blacky said. Sort of sad looking. Then Stach Speyer's roar came from inside the place.

"Waters, you and every gent here is under arrest," the new Succara marshal yelled, stepping in the front door. "I've been tipped off they's trouble brewing down here. I order you to surrender your hardware and—"

Somebody snorted laughter. It seemed ridiculous. Speyer with just two men bucking this whole gang!

"Put your guns on the bar, gents!" Speyer said evenly.

It grew ominously quiet, Nobody moved. Peeping through a corner of a side window, Red spotted Waters standing down by the back end of the bar. He kept flipping up a coin slowly, catching it in his palm. He faced toward the front, looking at Speyer. Then he spoke.

"You ain't gone locoed, have you, Mr. Law?"

Speyer snapped, "I ordered the guns on the bar...Now!'

Waters shifted his eyes around the room then winked. "Mr. Marshal," he addressed Speyer again, "if your Law is so danged big, why don't it do something? Why don't you enforce it, huh? One of my boys got shot up. Why ain't you out a-running down the snake that did it! Huh?"

Stack Speyer's legs shifted a few inches further apart. "I'm giving the orders, Waters... Afterwards, you can give us a description of the man and we'll pick him up." There was a cold ugly edge in his voice now.

"What the hell do you mean—afterwards, Speyer?"

"After you and your gun slicks obey my orders—and shed your hog-legs!" Speyer fired back. "Make it fast—and now!"

Waters tossed the coin in the air again. But that time he let it jangle on the bar top as he flung his right hand down to a holster. "Would you like to *try* to put us all under arrest, marshal?" His laugh rang out.

"NOW!" SAID Blacky outside. They hit that double side door like the buzzard pack they were, eager to get at the prey. One man had just thrown one door open a foot when a bullet gashed through it from the other side. A warning shout followed atop the gun report.

Blacky had ordered his men to fire the first shots in the air, to attempt to stampede them. But, instead, three-four of the Waters' gang were trig-

gering lead their way as they barged in. A screech like something from a banshee came from Big Rosie. One of the hanging coal-oil lamps was shattered—and went crashing to the floor. All was pandemonium as hangers-on and Waters' men broke and ducked for cover from the unexpected flank attack. The place was deafening with gun thunder. Red threw one shot high, then dropped back against the side wall and watched.

Men were breaking for the back door. Speyer had thrown himself to one side up in the niche where the front end of the bar stopped. Some dashed out the front. Three were trying to scramble through a side window at the same time. Then Red sighted Fortmann of the single arm through the gun smoke; he stood up in the shadows of a front corner, his single weapon out, calmly taking in the scene, ready to defend himself. Lead began to snap back at the raiders as some of Waters' men rallied enough to fight back. The tall sad-faced Waters himself had disappeared.

One man sank down at the corner of the back end of the bar, drilled through the chest. He looked like a kicked dog as he collapsed slowly forward, knife-scarred face wrenching with the realization he was fatally hit. Another, going over was the sill of the window across the room, sagged back helplessly with a head wound.

"Go outside after the rats!" shouted Forell to his men.

Stach Speyer had already ducked out the front door. Forell's gun slicks hustled out it into the meandering road. Red Cully trailed them, sickened by the whole thing.

SOME OF the Whisky Row rats tried to make a running retreating fight of it down the road, pausing to twist and snap back lead accompanied by slashes of muzzle flame. But they never had a chance: Blacky Forell's trigger slammers never gave them a chance to get set. Two men were wounded when they ran into a little cabin. Blacky's bunch kept moving down the road. Waters and some of his men ran into another whisky mill. It was then that Red discovered Stach Speyer was ahead of them, after Waters. Red closed in fast.

The ex-gambler marshal was already inside, throwing lead. He had nerve, all right. The nerve to back his own vicious schemes, Red decided, following him. Waters and the men still left with him went out the rear, heading for the brush. Speyer and Willkins ran out after them as Forell and his men followed. Somebody bawled that the Succara Vigilantes were coming. Then Red too was out behind the place under the full late-risen moon. The Whisky Row rats were snapping lead from cover of the brush.

And then Red Cully saw it. Speyer, in his eagerness to get Waters, a leader of one of the gangs who could menace his attempt to rule the town, was down there crouched by a shed. And some yards back, standing erect, was Blacky Forell. He was watching Stach, intent on him, smiling coldly under the moon. Blacky's gun arm went out slowly, stiffened. Maybe he was aiming at something in the brush beyond Stach. Red didn't waste time in asking him.

Red really didn't know why he made the move to defend Stach. He knew the man had planned one of the dangedest double-crosses, knew that a man like the gambler, who meant to betray the woman who loved him and believed in him, would betray a hired hand like Red himself in half the time. Yet, for some reason, perhaps because Stach had unknowingly given him back his manhood in that fight in the livery barn alley, he was on Stach's side.

Red's gun muzzle flamed. The bullet whizzed by Blacky's shoulder before the other could trigger. Blacky dropped to his knees protectively. When he looked around it was too late to tell who'd fired at him from the rear. Because a slug from the brush had winged Red in the flesh of the left shouder, and the impact of a

hunk of lead from a .45 is enough to knock flat any man even though it just passes through flesh. Red was down flat.

But, at the last instant, from down by the shed, Stach Speyer had glanced around in time to see what Red had done...

12

THE fight was over in almost the same moment; Holden and his Vigilantes came spurring down Whisky Row. Pop Waters and his trigger slammers beat it back into the brush, realizing the odds were too heavy against them. Blacky Forell and his boys got out of there fast. The Vigilantes went combing futilely into the brush for the Whisky Row bunch, and Speyer himself came hustling back to help Red who'd already arisen.

They went back to the jailhouse and Stach summoned the sawbones who cleaned out the bullet gash in Red's arm and strapped it up. Then the doc went to the rear to have a look at Sorle. Asa Holden came in. "Stach, I want to congratulate you. It sure took nerve to step into the middle of that ruckus between those gangs down there."

Stach threw Red a quick look, then shrugged. "Oh, it was nothing—'cept in line of duty," he told Holden.

"It took nerve. Five of that Whisky Row outfit have been counted for dead. And that's no loss."

Stach nodded, eyes narrowing, and Red knew he was planning some new move. Holden said: "I think—from what little I heard—the other outfit was Blacky Forell's boys."

"Is that so?" Stach said. "Forell, eh...Hum-m..." His eyes widened in feigned innocence. "Well, who'd have thought so?"

"Cain't be certain. But us Vigilantes'll be behind you, Stach, on any move you make," Holden promised before leaving.

Stach looked at Red and winked broadly, poured a drink from the bottle he kept in the desk. Red, shirt back on, lifted his in answer to Stach's toast. The ex-gambling king dumped his down like so much water. Then his face grew cold, thoughful. "Dammit, but I should uh nabbed Pop Waters tonight. Either shot him or brought him in on some charge, preferably wounded," Stach mused. "That snake can make trouble. He'll be hiding out there with the brush poppers now: no chance of tracking him down. And he'll be sore as a hornet. And there's Jarris. That Sorle, now, if he'd—" He left the familiar remark unsaid as he tilted his head to listen to the sawbones moving around in the rear: then he cut his sphinxlike eyes back to Red Cully. "I saw what you did tonight," Speyer said softly. "It's what I hired you for. I won't forget it—Blacky was about to try for me—I think. Yeah. He will—sometime—anyway—unless I get him first. Which I intend to do. Yeah." His tone was mild yet somehow had the iron note of determination.

"Why not keep your deal with him?" asked Red, knowing of the double-cross planned. "The two of you could run this town together?"

"What?" Stach's gambler's mask slipped for the moment as he looked incredulous. "Deal with that rat? I'm only using him. I intend to—"

THEN THERE was a rapping on the front door. It was Willkins, just getting back from the Whisky Row ruckus. Stach's eyes became stone as his right-hand man moved in. The raw-boned Willkins said something about it having been rough down there. Stach sneered. "Might've been rougher—for me, you lunkhead! You've always been paid to protect me. But if Red here hadn't been smart tonight—I'd have had it between the shoulder blades from Forell. Where the blazes were you?"

Willkins made some kind of a vague mumbling reply, and the

gambler struck him—smack across the mouth with his open hand. The tall gunman drew back, staring. His mouth framed an unspoken word. Stach slapped him again, cold-eyed, deliberate. His left hand was in a vest pocket and Red could see the butt of the derringer he gripped in case Willkin's made a move. The gambler's psychology was evident. He was used to living with his life in constant danger. This Willkins was the gent who'd been drawing tophand wages to protect it; and this night Willkins hadn't been there when danger threatened.

Speyer's hand cracked again across Willkins' red face. The latter fell another stride, mouth twisting. "You weren't there in the tight," the gambler snapped at him. "Not when I needed you. I warned you once before ..Go ahead! Now go out and get orey-eyed. But, dammit, one of these days I'll fire you!"

Willkins straightened his sombrero. "I could talk."

"And who in tarnation'd believe you?" Stach taunted. "And who'd pick up your body the morning after you did talk?"

Willkins cut his eyes balefully at Red Cully as he sidled toward the door. Then he went out.

Stach laughed. "He'll be crawling back in the morning like a whupped dog," he predicted. "Tail 'tween his legs. Come creeping in the back door to sleep it off. He—"

Then the sawbones came up front from seeing Sorle, the wounded man in the rear of the jailhouse. "Some day this town'll realize what a first-class doc I am," he announced. "I pulled Sorle out all right. He's going to live. He's better right now, much better. Even wants a drink. Another coupla d a y s and he'll be up and around."

Speyer swore softly. Then he cut short the man's b o a s t i n g and hustled him out. "I might drop around to have a little private talk with you, Doc," he said in parting.

It was decided Red would go up to Blacky Forell's place that night. After what had happened down in Whisky Row, Forell might be suspicious; it would look better for Red to be around him more.

Going up the road to the restaurant-rooming house Forell owned, Red Cully was not thinking of himself. He was thinking of Sorle, the man Stach Speyer did not want to live. And also of Willkins, the man Stach had slapped—had slapped in front of a witness. Something told him that was the ex-gambler's first mistake. He remembered the way Willkins' eyes had cut toward him..

13

A COUPLE OF days passed as Forell and Stach Speyer decided to let the town cool off after the Whisky Row fight. Succara was almost too quiet for safety's sake, and Red Cully was wondering. W o n d e r i n g about riding out, just cutting free of this dirty setup. Yet, he knew he would not; he had given his word to Speyer. And he knew he was lying to himself when he raised that, as the excuse for not quitting, in his own mind. It was something more, that woman, Johnie, with the braided coils of black hair.

The next dawn, there was a burial from the jailhouse. Sorle had died suddenly in the night, apparently, after being on his way to recovery. There was just the sawbones, orey-eyed, the undertaker, and four men he'd hired to tote the coffin up to Succara's sandy Boothill in the cold dawn. Sorle had no relatives, no friends save t h o s e of the moment when he bought them a drink. Those few with Red Cully and Speyer followed the b o d y up to the burial ground; they planted him.

It was Stach S p e y e r, temporary marshal, who'd paid for the pine box for the man. Stach, they said, was not only a first-class John Law, he was a generous man.

Red wondered. He knew how much Stach had wanted Sorle, victim of a gunning by a Jarris cowhand, dead. He came into the jail office; Stach was not there. Willkins was, sulking in a chair, with a breath you could have hitched your horse to, but he had a message: Stach wanted to see Red in his room up in the hotel. Red went down to the place, up to Room 318. It was just in time to see Johnie Drews leaving. They met in the hall. Very formally, she said: "Good evening, Mr. Lindsay."

He said, "The name is Cully, madam, if you've forgotten."

She smiled as she drew her silken shawl around her. "Yes? Mr. Lindsay was the way I last heard it."

She stalked by him. He went on to Stach Speyer's suite. Stach put his cards on the table right away. "Tonight we hit Selvin. You and Gunner Smiggs start a fight in there. Then—get out. A faked gunfight."

"Yes?" Red said.

"You understand?" Stach said.

"Mebbe," Red came back.

"It's simple. You and Smiggs fake a ruckus, then you pull out. We—me and Blacky—take over then. And we close up Lucky Selvin because he's had trouble in his place."

"And mebbe I don't like it," Red told him.

Speyer's eyes lidded. "Johnie's very lovely, isn't she?"

"Be careful, Stach!"

"Be careful yourself, Red. You don't quite understand the game I'm playing. I intend to clean up this town. And you are dead."

"What?"

"That's right. You don't exist—unless I choose to say so."

"What do you mean, Stach?"

"What I said...One of those men we planted on Boothill from the Whisky Row fight, he's got your name on his headpiece. Red Cully. You don't exist now—unless I want to talk. You are officially buried."

Red's right hand levered from his gun, but Speyer shook his head. "No. Don't try it, Red. I always have a man covered. But always." He flicked a derringer from his sleeve. "And there happens to be a U.S marshal who dropped into town..."

RED'S EYES hardened as he tried to read the man's mind. "I'f I'm dead—if Red Cully doesn't exist any more—how—what does this U.S. marshal mean to me, Speyer?"

Speyer said nonchalantly, "Because you are now Big Red Lindsay, as far as anybody knows but me. I'm the one gent who could prove you aren't him. Sabe? And Lindsay was accused a couple of years ago of wounding a Federal officer down on the Rio. You see, now?"

Anger flayed through Red like a writhing whiplash. He got out huskily. "And I saved your hide the other night, Speyer!"

The ex-gambler nodded. "You did. Because it's what I pay you tophand wages for, Red." He smiled mildly. "String along with me, Red; I'm always prepared against a double-cross. But string with me and you'll be made. I intend to clean up this pueblo—in my own way. And I need you on my side. That's all. You gave me your word on it once."

Red nodded, admitting it; but he knew that at the finish, when the wily Stach made his play to double-cross the town, there would have to be a showdown between them. A bitter one it would be, too.

"Now, about the play at Selvin's place," Stach said smoothly, picking up his drink. "I've already warned him I've had more complaints about crooked dealing in his joint, that I'm prepared to close him up. So, now, when we stage this ruckus, we'll have him dead to rights. He's hard-pressed for dinero anyway, I know. And I been tipped off that Lucky and Pop Waters have had their heads together. Waters wants to get back at me, and Selvin is afraid of me; I've got to run him out afore they team up."

He rubbed the lapel of his coat softly. "Then there's Sam Jarris. He's the dangerous one. But with Eddie Sorle now dead and gone, I can hold Jarris' man on a murder charge. And then..." His eyes narrowed.

Red said, "It might be tough to prove."

"Maybe...maybe..."

"There's Toby Barron, the killer of the late marshal, up at the jailhouse too," Red reminded the gambler. It was a baiting remark, a test of Speyer's sincerity about cleaning up the town.

The gambler shrugged. "We'll try him when the judge comes back to town; no hurry. Barron's my ace in the hole. So long as I hold him I got the town on my side. He's a constant reminder that I brought in the late marshal's killers. But with Sorle dead...That Joe Carny, Jarris' man up in the jailhouse. If I could—I got it!" He sprang to his feet. "We let Carny go—make it look like an escape. He'll run to Jarris' place, of course. He'll be scared as blazes believing he's killed a man. Then we can charge Sam Jarris with hiding out a wanted killer! That's it."

He strode around, gloating. "Stach Speyer is one smart devil, all right. We'll let him make his break a little after sundown."

Red mentally seconded the "devil" part of the remark. Speyer had Satan's own knack for plotting the downfall of his enemies.

"Now, about Selvin's place," Stach started off again.

WHEN WILLKINS was at the door. He had a letter that had been delivered to the marshal at the jail by a special messenger who just come in off the trail.

"The Chillicote-Succara Stage Company," Stach read from the envelope. "Wonder what's itching them." He slit it open, read swiftly, then began to chuckle."Want special protection through Creosote Canyon for tomorrow night's stage, they say. It'll be bringing in a consignment of cash for the bank. Umm." He took a fresh swig of his drink. "Want the Law to meet it and escort it through the canyon. After all, they've been held up by road agents before." He sat down again. "Meaning Pop Waters and his Whisky Row boys, of course. And Pop needs something like that again to rebuild his pretensions in these parts. Yes, after that licking I gave him. If he knew it was coming through with that specie....Yes-s...."

Red could practically see his shrewd conniving brain at work. Stach lounged back. "Yes, we'll give it protection—till we run into trouble. Yes-s, that's the way we'll play it. We'll use it as a trap—for Waters. And maybe Selvin too if he's stringing along with Waters. Uh-huh. Willkins, go around to Blacky's place and tell him I want to see him. We'll be very busy protecting that stage tomorrow night in Creosote Canyon. The play for Selvin's joint can wait. Tell Blacky I gotta have a talk with him, Willkins."

Willkins went out. Red noticed he was still sullen, seldom giving any answers. And that his resentment appeared to be directed against Red himself. After all, Cully had seen him slapped around by his boss.

Stach winked at Red. "This is going to be easy—easier than spitting in the creek. Tonight I'll get word down to Whisky Row that that stage is coming in with a load of dinero. Waters'll hear about it; after all, he and his bunch have stopped stages in the past. They usually hit 'em just after they come out of the canyon on the uphill grade. Waters needs to do something to restore his prestige. He'll hit that stage if he knows what it's carrying, and I'll see that he knows."

Red said, "Yes? And you'll stop him?"

The ex-gambler put a match to a smoke. "We—and Blacky Forell will. We follow the stage down, jump Waters right after he hits it. We get the specie, then we blame the job on Waters; nice, isn't it? Slick, eh?"

"Very slick," Red said woodenly, knowing he had to play along for the time being. Then Blacky arrived, and listened to them plan it.

Blacky sat there with his constantly twitching hands. Stach outlined the thing. Blacky smirked. "And we get the dinero, eh, with Waters being blamed for it?'

"That's about the idea," Stach said through quirly smoke.

They parted on that. That evening, a little after sundown, Carny was allowed to escape, Stach himself, pretending to be drunk, took his dinner up to the cell, left the door unlocked on departing. And a saddled-up cayuse stood in the shed out back. But Carney was some time in coming, evidently suspecting a trick. Finally his boots creaked on the stairs.

Red was sprawled in a chair in the office, feigning sleep, his gunbelt hung from a peg in the wall in plain sight. He snored a little as he heard Carny's approach. The man poked his head into the office, beard-stubbled face jerking around. Red watched through the fringe of the eyelashes of his lidded eyes. Carny breathed hard once. Then he darted to the desk and snatched up the .45 left lying there in plain sight like bait. Only it wasn't loaded.

He turned, keeping Red covered a long moment. It was plain that he was uncertain what to do. Finally he stepped into the hall to the rear. The back door scraped open. In a couple of minutes there was the drum of hoofbeats leaving the horse shed, the beats of a cayuse that had had the spur steel slammed to it hard. Stach stepped out of the bedroom on the first floor, laughing away.

"The fool!" he cried. "Jarris oughta hang him when he shows up. But Jarris ain't smart enough, the fool! He'll run right to his boss. Which is what I want...Say, where is Willkins, anyway?"

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BY LATE the next afternoon, Willkins hadn't made an appearance either. Stach didn't seem much worried; Red was, a little, though. He'd seen the reaction on Willkins' face when he'd been struck like a disobedient animal before a witness.

"The gopher doesn't usually stay orey-eyed this long," Stach said. "Shucks! He'll come crawling back, always does. And I'll peel the hide off him when he does show up....Now, about this business tonight...." He had it all planned with Blacky. They'd grab the dinero from the stage right after Waters and his bunch hit it. Stach had already received word that Waters meant to, that he had fallen for the bait. "Then, Red, you'll bring it into town. Easy."

"And then you and Blacky split it, eh?" Red put in.

Stach's eyes lidded. "Maybe, maybe," he said.

Red wondered what he meant by that, wondered if he was planning to double-cross Forell that early in the game. Then there was a knock on the back door of the jailhouse. Red went back, a gun drawn. It was Johnie to see Speyer. She said good-evening to Red and moved on by, but a faint perfume drifted in her wake, hung there in the hallway where Red waited while they talked in the front office.

Then their words broke off. Red heard a smothered sigh from her and knew Stach was kissing her. The sweat started on Red's face and his hands fisted and twisted at his sides. He heard her voice faintly. "Stach, there's something I've got to—" And then the ex-gambling hall king's laugh. There was no more talk for some seconds more.

"Stach," her voice finally got started again. "This is important. At the dancehall, a customer was fairly drunk. He talked too much."

"A common habit amongst males when they get likkered up and a beautiful woman smiles at them," Stach interrupted. "And you are so—"

"Stach, please! Pop Waters and his bunch are going to jump the stage in Creosote Canyon tonight."

"Is that so? Really?" Stach said, feigning surprise.

"I know my information is correct. Stach, please be serious!"

"I am, Johnie. I'll meet the stage and escort it in; I'll see that that dinero gets through safely....But don't let anybody know you—uh—warned me, Johnie. Keep it quiet....Even afterward. Understand?"

"Why, afterward, Stach?" she said, voice a little chilly. "Will you have

Blacky and his men with you again?"

Stach laughed easily, said he guessed he wouldn't need any help. And that, anyway, the ends justified the means. Then he kissed her again, reassured her. Johnie left by the back door. Stach called to Red. But the latter stood rooted for moments, hating this man, speculating on crossing him....

A COUPLE of hours later, Red and Stach rode out of town. On the other side of the valley they picked up Blacky Forell and his bunch. Blacky was glad to see Red with the marshal, figuring Red was his man anyway. In the sunset they pushed into Creosote Canyon on the east, worked up it.

"You're sure Waters is going to try to take the stage?" Blacky asked.

"Positive," Stach said confidently. Up in the canyon they halted by a rock spring, dismounting as a low sallow moon crept over the horizon. "The coach'll come by this point in about an hour. Waters won't be up this far."

They puffed on quirlies, waiting, Forell's gun pack restless. Finally, with a chill wind blowing, they caught the sound of the coach coming down the trail. There was the creak of an ungreased axle. The drumming of hoofs on the road. The Concord coach rounded a bend in the canyon, careening on the shale-littered trail. Speyer rode out into the middle of it, his badge pinned on his coat. Hailed them. Identified himself.

The mule skinner at the reins took his hand away from his side arm. The guard beside him lowered his rifle. "You're Speyer of Succara?" the latter demanded.

"Here's the letter from your home office?" Stach called back. He rode up beside the stage and presented it. "I got a posse of special deputies here to see you in safely. We'll follow you in; better if we stay back a ways, I reckon."

The skinner scratched a match under the moon. He and the guard eyed the letter, then nodded. They only had one passenger, a drunken jewelry drummer. That and the leathern bag bank specie which they had up on the box between them.

"Look out for trouble; I expect it," Speyer warned.

The mule skinner released the brakes, cracked his long black-snake whip. The coach moved on, metal rims of the wheels rattling over the shale. Red and Stach and the Forell bunch took the trails a few hundred feet behind it. They all moved down the canyon at a hot lick as the moon climbed over the gaunt pines on the southern wall of the canyon.

They got almost to the end of it, almost to the upgrade that led out across the valley. The ex-gambler marshal and his reputed posse dropped further behind, and shots rang out suddenly from a niche in the canyon. One of the lead cayuses crumpled in the traces, and the coach twisted off the trail. Then Waters and his men swept out of the stand of cottonwoods there in the elbow of the canyon. Struck before they were expected.

Stach let out a yell. He led the bunch charging down behind the stopped stage. Waters and his Whisky Row gunners were swinging around it as the mule skinner and his guard fought back. The former dived off into the brush. The drunken drummer stuck his head out the window and gaped, then the first of Waters' gun wolves saw the men driving down the trail at them. They were dumbfounded. Stach's gun blazed. Riding just off his flank, Red Cully fired with his right hand; a member of the other bunch reeled in the saddle.

RED SAW the stage guard suddenly throw up his hands in surrender, dropping his carbine. One of the Waters' bunch swung his pony over beside the box and snatched the leathern sack with the dinero. Big stoop-shouldered Waters wheeled his horse to meet the riders coming up from behind the coach. Blacky Forell fired. Red himself shot. There was no knowing who got Waters.

He went up stiff-legged in the stirrups a moment, tilted backward. Then he was flopping sideward from the kak, his chest smashed open by a slug that had killed him an instant after it

hit. Stach spurred by everybody to drive his horse up beside the baffled man with the pouch of specie. Stach fired once. Then, pressing closer, he hit the gent over the side of the skull with his smoking weapon. The gent doubled over the saddle horn. And Stach tore the pouch from his grasp even as he started to release it.

"Red, Red!" he bawled through the gun reports.

Red swung up beside him. The Waters bunch were already being driven back from the stage-coach. Stach shoved the leathern sack at Red. "Take it into the jailhouse!" Stach yelled. "No—to my room at the hotel!" he corrected himself. "To the hotel!" Then a wild slug zinged by and he ducked.

Red flung the spur steel to his stallion, flung by the halted stage. The Waters bunch were being forced out of the mouth of the canyon by Blacky Forell's men. Red swung wide, hit the open range of the valley toward Succara. The stallion stretched belly. A bullet jetted dirt in the earth beside him. Then he was out of it, over a swell in the prairie, with the reports of the running gunfight ebbing behind him.

He dropped to a steady lope, wondering why he was doing this thing. Yet Stach held the whiphand over him. And there was something else; he didn't know why but something made him believe in Stach Speyer despite all the sign to the contrary. He had reason to hate the hombre, to doubt him. As he rode he argued with himself, called himself a fool; he was participating in a stage holdup just as much as if he'd ridden with Pop Waters' band. Red cursed himself.

HE ROUNDED a bend in the trail beside a wooded knob of hill. And ahead, from amongst the trees, came the whinny of another pony at the approach of Red's horse. Red had his gun leaping out and was sawing on the reins as that other rider bolted into sight across the road ahead of him. Another rider swung into sight, closer, from the scrub at the other side of the trail.

"Hoist 'em, mister—and drop that dinero on the road!" the second man bawled out harshly. Even as he gave the command, a gust of wind whipped free the empty sleeve of his coat; and Red Cully knew it was the one-armed one, Fortmann.

He snapped a shot at them, then switched his pony around. He figured it was Blacky Forell pulling a double-cross on Stach before the latter could double cross him. After all, he was almost dead certain Fortmann was working with Blacky. He didn't even know why he was trying to get away, risking his own hide—except, maybe, because he hated Blacky more than he disliked Stach. And always there was the point that while Stach lived, he himself was safe.

Two slugs sang over his head as he drove back around the long bend of the trail. It slanted upward there. Then he sighted the open range beyond the stand of trees. Moments later, as he neared the prairie, gunfire bit out of the darkness at him from the end of the wooded strip before him. And he got a glimpse of Fortmann, leaning out of the shadows as he fired.

"Give yourself up, Red!" the other bellowed. He'd cut back through the trees, travelling in a straight line to cut off Red as he followed the loop of the trail.

Red sawed on the reins again to swing his cayuse up into the timber. But one of Fortmann's slugs slashed chips and sparks from the top of a big boulder at the trail's edge. The cloud of chipped stone and sparks terrified Red's animal. It reared, throwing him rearward from the saddle as he was caught unaware, trying to return the fire to hold Fortmann off. He landed in the dirt hard, on his shoulders, but still clutching the money pouch. He staggered up, groggy from the impact.

The second hombre, trailing him, swung around the bend from behind. Hauling to a halt, going straight up in the stirrups, he levelled and fired twice. Red was trying to get into the trees. The bullets whined by as he stumbled over a protruding root and sprawled flat on his belly.

"I got him!" the second rider sang out. "I got him!" He came driving down and swung from the kak near

where Red lay in the undergrowth. He came striding toward the spot.

RED HAD twisted onto one side, had his gun hand up and around. He hit the trigger. The gent staggered backward, half spinning, a slug having ripped through the flesh of his shoulder.

"Gawd—" he howled, then turned to groaned curses through his locked teeth as he reeled backward and around to the far side of his pony. "The snake got me—he got me!" he called out to Fortmann. Then, grasping the horn of his saddle for support, he walked beside his cayuse out toward the other end of the bend on the trail.

Red poked his head warily over the top of the undergrowth, but the boulder cut the man from his sight. He caught the sounds of faint talk from down there. Then the wind, freshening, blowing from him toward them, cut off that. He thought he heard the thud of pony hoofs moving off but he couldn't be sure. His only horse, quieted now, stood about ten feet down the trail, but Red made no move toward the animal; it could be a trap. They might be waiting for him to step into the open.

Cautiously, as silently as possible, he shifted about ten feet deeper into the trees. Fortmann might be working around toward him. Red crouched behind a chunk of rotting stump, ears keyed for the slightest sound. But none came. And finally, when a cloud rack smirched the moon's face, he darted out, grabbed the reins, and swung aboard his cayuse. He turned toward Succara, spurring hard. Nothing happened. A half mile and there was no sign of pursuit at all.

He forked the stallion on into Succara, went up to Speyers room and tossed the locked pouch onto the bed. Then, in the moonglow through the window, he saw Asa Holden, head of the Vigilantes, sitting in the chair in the corner. Holden nodded as Red slapped a hand to a holster.

"The dinero from the stage?" he asked. "Stach said he would send it in sometime tonight. I'll take charge of it for the bank till morning, Red.... That was my understanding with Stach...."

* * *

RED WAS still dazed by the turn of events when he went down to the jail. He'd realized there would have been no sense in trying to draw against Holden, in even arguing with him. He would not have been in Stach's hotel suite if he hadn't known about the bank dinero, if he hadn't been in on some kind of a deal with Stach. Red was more puzzled than ever. Stach seemed like, talked like a crook. Yet—

"There's a deeper game being played here than I know about," he muttered as he rode down beside the jailhouse to the horseshed.

On some hunch he did not unsaddle the animal, just leaving it in the shed. He noticed that the back gate in the jailyard wall stood ajar. Then, as he advanced, he saw that the back door of the jailhouse itself was open. He whipped out his Colts, stepping softly. Moved up to the door. Lamplight from the front office filtered back down the corridor.

There was a faint moan. He saw a prone, slim form beside the stairs leading to the cells above, ran in even as Johnie Drews sat up slowly. There was a bruise over her left temple. She was dressed in riding breeches and a man's coat. She stared up at him as her senses cleared.

"Where's Stach? Where's Stach?" she asked faintly.

"He'll be back in a spell, I reckon." Red said. He lifted her and carried her into the office. "Just rest easy, ma'm, and..." There was some water in a bucket in the corner. He brought the dipper over, and, holding her propped up in the chair, made her drink.

She shook her head to clear it. "Stach. I got to tell him!" she said desperately. "Get him! Get him, please, Red."

Red shook his head. "Stach is out on the range somewhere? What happened Johnie?"

"They got Toby Barron. They snaked him out of here, Red. I tried to stop them when I got word of it." Her eyelids sagged a moment and she touched the bruised temple. "When I

heard one of the girls at the dance-hall talking, a girl who knows one of the Jarris cowhands." Her head sagged.

Red produced a bandanna and wetted it and mopped her face gently. She rallied herself. "What do you mean—they got Toby Barron?" he asked.

"They snaked him out of here a little while ago. Sam Jarris and his men," she said, straightening. "Willkins was with them. He had a key to the cells. I heard one of the girls talking, and I hurried over to the hotel to find Stach—then here. One of them struck me down. They've stolen Stach's prisoner. Where is Stach?"

Red began to understand, knew then why Willkins hadn't been around that day. He'd sold out his boss, gone out to Jarris' Running J with the information that the marshal would be out of town that night. And Jarris had struck, but effectively. He had something to trade with Speyer now. The latter would have to answer to the town how he'd lost the killer of the late marshal. And Johnie's word on it would mean nothing because the town knew she was in love with Stach. She could tell her story, but Jarris could deny it all.

"Stach is whipped unless he gets back here soon," she said faintly. "I think I know where they went. I heard them talking after I was knocked down. I was dazed but—but I heard the name. The name...if I could only remember it...." She sat huddled beating at her cheeks with clenched hands. Then, with a soft sigh, she slumped over....

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RED PICKED her up as if she were a fragile doll and carried her in and put her on the cot in the little bedroom off the office. She was still conscious, moaning a little, but dazed. It was the shock. Maybe she would remember after a little. He looked down at her slim body for some seconds, then wrenched his eyes away. He returned to the office and gulped from the dipper himself and built a smoke.

He dragged deep, trying to add up things. The struggle inside himself started again. Why be loyal to the ex-gambler, Stach? Actually he owed the man nothing now. He'd made the play up on the creek in the attempted ambush when they'd been moving in on the Barron brothers' cabin that time. Otherwise Fortmann and those gunslicks of Blacky Forell's would have fast easy work of Stach Speyer and his men. And then he, Red, had saved Stach's hide that night in the ruckus down in Whisky Row. No, he'd more than paid back Stach for anything the latter had done for him.

He thought, *I could cut out now.. Quit this dirty game of double-cross afore I'm trapped myself. If Forell ever learns I'm playing on Stach's side....* His eyes cut to the room where Johnie Drews lay. *I could tell her the truth about how Stach means to play it. How he's working with Blacky on the basis of the two of them take over this pueblo. Then how Stach means to rub out Blacky and rod the whole shebang himself. How Stach is deceiving her and....*

He went into action, found some whisky in the desk and re-entered the bedroom. Holding her up against one arm, he tried to get some whisky down her throat. When it burnt her tongue, she sat up straight and tried to push the bottle away. Red simply pinched her nostrils shut with one hard hand and forced the whisky into her mouth she had to swallow to breath. She flashed angry eyes on him.

"Why did you....you do that? I never drink! And .." Then her eyes widened. Blood was returning to her ashen face. "I know, I know where they said they were going. It was the old Morton place, the deserted rancho out on the range.... The Morton place." She swung her legs off the bed and reached for her flat-crowned hat. "That's where they were taking Toby Barron."

"Johnie," Red said, catching at her wrist. "I've got things to tell you.... to explain. I—"

"Stach isn't back yet?"

Red shook his head, trying to find words again.

She rose. "Tell him to get out to the Morton place—when he comes. I'm certain—that's where I heard them say they were headed....I—I'll try to trail them out that way."

"What?"

She said. "Stach is trying to play it straight. But Jarris can break him—if he holds Toby Barron. So somebody has to do something."

He stared. "You'd ride out there alone?"

"Stach isn't here, is he?" she said simply. "And Willkins sold him out. Somebody...."

Red picked up his hat. "I'll ride out there. You can't go."

"How will you find it, Red? I know the way."

He tried to argue her down, tried to tell her a woman would only be in the way. But he knew she was right. He was a stranger in these parts. A few moments later he brought his roan stallion around from the horse-shed and they rode out of town together. They went over the hummock past Whisky Row and then turned north up the valley under the stars. It was locoed on his part, he told himself. Stach Speyer wasn't worth it. But he couldn't let her go alone.

THEY RODE with little talk between them, taking a fork to the northwest up beyond the creek. The trail wound through rougher and rougher country as it sloped up from the main valley floor. They crossed a feeder creek, went through a notch in the hills as the night grew older. Then they were in a side valley spurring off from the Succara main basin. From the fresh horse sign on the trail, Red could tell easily that riders had passed over that way recently.

They came to the top of a rise, and he grabbed for her bridle. Ahead, under the clear moon, he'd spotted the small band of riders. Beyond them, standing like a gray ghost in the barren country, was an abandoned ranchhouse.

"That's the Morton place," Johnie cried. "It's them."

Red had swung their ponies off the trail. The two of them watched the riders swerve from the trail and cut up through the high rank grass to the old rancho. The man and the girl waited a spell. No lights appeared in the place.

She said thoughtfully, "They should be off guard now. They'd never suspect they're being followed. But they may move on by morning... I left a note for Stach at the hotel I was coming out here. He'll be out soon with a posse. But they must be stopped from going on before he gets here."

Red nodded. "Or followed if they do move on."

"That's right," she agreed.

They began to ride on again, cautiously. When they dropped down off the rise, they lost sight of the abandoned rancho for a while.

"If we can just get in close enough to keep a watch on them," she said.

He nodded. They rounded a bend in the trail by a stand of second-growth pine. "We'd better dismount now," he said. And then the first slug droned by his sombrero.

He drove down for his own right-hand gun, got it out as another bullet whistled by. A voice roared from the pines: "Hoist 'em, Red Lindsay—or do you want the woman cut down too. Hoist 'em! We got the drop on you!"

There was nothing to see amidst the trees. Red hesitated; the third slug sang by. That one came from ahead, from over the top of a boulder beside the trail. And Red knew they were in a trap. Another piece of lead whistled on the night, causing the girl to lurch in the saddle as it passed her hat.

"Well, Lindsay?" challenged the voice again.

RED FIGURED fast. The whole game would be over if they once captured Johnie, Stach Speyer's girl; then Stach's hands would really be tied. He hesitated. Making any kind of a play now would endanger her; but, on the other hand, if they were taken, the Lord alone knew what might happen to her out at this

isolated, deserted ranch-house. He called out: "All right, gents. Looks like you hold the aces, by grab!" And he was dropping from the kak as he sidled his pony close to the girl's to shield her from one side. "Lay off the shooting, will you?"

Then, on the ground, he seized the bridle of Johnie's pony and swung the animal around in the direction whence they'd come. "Ride—ride hard," he whispered, and struck the animal over the rump with the gun he'd snaked out. It bolted off; in the same instant he was snapping lead into the trees toward where the ambushers were.

There was an enraged curse and muzzle flame polka-dotted the black night from the wooded strip. Red ducked into the grass on the left side and crouched. Through the crackle of guns he could hear the pound of her fleeing pony's hoofs. Red had his second Colts free as two men appeared from behind a boulder up the grassy trail and came darting down through the shadows. Red knew the game was about over for him. He was like a guy sitting with a busted flush. But just so long as Johnie got away, he didn't care too much; maybe this was the way it had always been destined to be for him.

He came up on one knee and took a shot at the pair coming down the trail. There was a screech, but Red paid. From across in the trees, a man had been waiting for just that, waiting for powder flame from Red's gun to show him where Red was. The other's slug came within an inch of giving Red Cully a ticket to Boothill. It sliced through the grass and nicked him on the side of the head, gashing his scalp. As he rocked on his knees, fighting nausea, he was vaguely conscious of the red fluid running down the side of his face.

Then he steadied himself. If he could get back onto the trail, hit the saddle again and ride straight on toward the old rancho, he might have a skinny chance. And he'd be pulling them away from the escaping Johnie. He couldn't see his pony, then; a moment later he saw it ten yards up the trail—but down flat on its flank, motionless. They had slain the animal, and several men were rushing through the trees across the way to the edge of the trail to blast him.

"Git after the woman!" somebody bellowed over the din.

Moments later a man in the saddle bolted from the woods down to Red's right to take off after the girl. Half locoed, knowing his own doom was sealed, Red leaped out from his thin cover and threw down on the rider. He fired once and the man flew from the saddle as if struck by some huge invisible club. Red twisted, sidling to make himself as difficult a target as possible, and slammed a slug into a man emerging from the trees. The latter stumbled backward, coughing wildly. Red jumped back into the waist-high grass again.

There was a lull in the firing for a moment. From over in the trees he could hear a man cursing throatily, saying they'd make the side-winder pay for putting lead into their pards. A rush would come, Red knew. And then he heard a rustling, a *swish-swishing* sound coming from the grass behind. They had him ringed, were tightening the noose on him. He tried to remember a prayer. Dying was tough medicine. Knowing it was coming made it even more bitter to swallow. Then he caught the thud of approaching hoofs. It could be help coming or—

IT WAS Johnie, reappearing on the back trail. She had her small gun out; she was coming back to side the man who'd tried to save her. Red wanted to scream imprecations; and yet, her action told him that she loved him. It was a strange thing to learn just as you were about to get your light put out. Her gun blazed an orange glow just as they started to rush him from the woods. Then a man leaped from the trees down where she was; Johnie never saw him. He jumped and grabbed her arm and tore the gun from it. Another appeared and grasped the bridle of her horse, hauling it to a stop. The rush ceased suddenly; they had the girl, knew they held the ace-in-the-hole.

"Well, Lindsay?" challenged the voice again.

Red Lindsay raised his arms; alone he might have tried to bolt cut of the trouble, but with Johnie there, it was a different story.

Several figures stepped out from the trees as two more men moved down the grassy trail from behind the boulder. Red recognized one as the bull-bodied brutal-faced Sam Jarris, the ruthless cattle baron. Beside him was the rawboned Willkins. Jarris guffawed on the night. "Think we was fools and not watching that back trail?" he taunted. "We saw you two coming along all right. And you rode into our trap real nice. You—" Then he saw that the woman was Johnie, recognized her as Stach Speyer's girl. Holding two guns levelled, he smirked up at her. "Now this is what I call real luck. We got Stach's own girl to hold as a hostage. Ha-ha! He'll be coming to terms real fast, I think. Climb down outa them saddles, folks. We aim to make you right comfortable."

The pair dismounted as ordered. One of the men took their bridles. All of them walked up to the old ranch house. And there was the light of a candle showing through one of the front windows now. A couple of men came out on the sagging porch as they approached. One was Joe Carny, the gent who'd shot up Eddie Sorle. Red gaped at the other. It was his one-armed nemesis, Fortmann. Fortmann who'd been with Blacky Forell's men in the attempted ambush back when Speyer was about to bring in Toby Barron and his dead brother. Red wondered what side of the fence he was playing it on.

The two captives were led inside. There was a crude table, a few boxes for seats in the front room of the place, And a jug of red-eye on the table. Jarris slapped down his sombrero beside it.

"Well, Stach figures he's one smart jasper, but I think I outsmarted him this time." He looked around gloatingly at his men. "Mebbe by the time I played my last card, Stach Speyer won't have no use for a woman, either. Huh, Lucky?"

Red, coming into the candlelight from the night, had missed the man lounging in the corner. When he saw Lucky Selvin the dudelike gambling-hall boss his eyes bulged. Selvin sneered. "Other gents can team up besides Stach and Blacky Forrell," he said. "But I always admired Stach's taste in womenfolk." He sauntered over, swung an arm around the girl's waist. "We can have a nice little time out here with a dancehall girl—even if we haven't got any music." He started to kiss her.

Something exploded in Red Cully then, and he thought he saw an opportunity for a break as the gambler unwittingly turned his side toward him, his side with his open-topped holster. Red grabbed for the gun as the girl tried to fend off Selvin.

"None of that, Lucky!" Jarris was just blurting.

Red got his fingers on the gambler's gun butt, then Willkins sprang in from the side. He brought his gun barrel down over the side of Red's head. Red had the sensation of falling down a deep deep well that got narrower and blacker the further he fell....

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VAGUELY HE recalled coming out of the stupor once, that daylight was angling in a window. Nothing was very clear to him. Then unconsciousness in the form of sleep claimed him.

When he woke again it was broad daylight—hot with green bottle-flies buzzing around. He tried to sit up and thumped back down against the floor. It sent painful throbs through his skull. Then he remembered Willkins and what had happened last night. He realized, too, he was trussed hand and foot on a blanket in a corner of a room. He stared around out of swollen eyes and figured it to be a second-floor room of the old rancho. From below he caught voices indistinctly. He thought of Johnie, twisting his head

around; but he was the only one in the bare room. Terror ripped through him like a ragged-bladed knife.

He struggled to sit up again, bumped his head against the wall. Waves of nausea shook him and things grew black once more. When he opened his eyes again, Carny and Fortmann were standing in the doorway. Carny held a tin plate of some grub and a cup of java.

"Well, you fed me in jail, Lindsay," he said. "So I guess I got to feed you now. Keep him covered," he told Fortmann who stood with a gun in his lone hand. "He's an ornery critter." He put down the grub and came over and untied Red's hands that were trussed up in front of him. "Times've changed, ain't they, pardner?"

Red couldn't touch the greasy food. But after massaging his hands and wrists he did manage to swallow some of the lukewarm coffee.

"Where's the girl?" he asked hoarsely.

Carny sneered. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

Fortmann spoke up. "In the other room," he said, nodding across the hall. "She's all right; Jarris don't play that way She'll *be* all right—if Speyer comes to terms...." He stuck his pistol in his waist-hand and produced a pint of redeye from a back pocket "Reckon you need some of this gila spit, mister."

The drink made Red feel a little more like a living human being. "What's the game?" he asked. "What does Jarris want? He can never get away with this. Stach'll bring the Law down on him with both barrels."

Jarris himself guffawed from the doorway. He strode into the room. "What Law, Lindsay? That thing he rods back in town? Afore I'm finished, I'm running him outa Succara. And that won't take too long now."

He came over to stand above the seated Red. "He was out to bust me. But now, I'm going to bust him. You can save your own hide if you're smart. You can make a statement in writing on the game Stach has been playing! Simple, ain't it?"

Red sat silent for some moments, then he shook his head. He wasn't being heroic. But, as he'd discovered, this was double-cross country; if he once gave such a statement, which would incriminate himself too as an aide of Stach's, Jarris would have no further use of him.

"All right, be plumb stubborn," Jarris snapped. "Won't do you no good. We'll git it outa you when we want it, in another day or so, mebbe. That'll be after we've run Stach Speyer out. Truss up his arms again, Joe," he told Carny before stalking out.

THE HOURS seemed to creep away as Red lay there helpless, skull a-throb. He mentally reviled himself time and again for letting himself and the girl get trapped. He wondered if Stach would come. But still, holding the girl, Jarris held the high card over any play Stach Speyer could make. And Jarris had joined forces with Lucky Selvin. Red's hopes sank as the day wore on.

Once he worked to his knees and moved down the room so as to look out the door. But the door of the room across the hall where Johnie was, was shut. They heard the noise below and he just got back to the corner before Carny and Willkins came hustling up the stairs. The latter spat on the floor beside Red. "Thought you were right smart making yourself Stach's right-hand gent, didn't you? Well, you're going to find out different." He swayed slightly. They'd evidently been sampling the jug downstairs.

They got noisier in the afternoon, shouting and laughing boisterously as they consumed more redeye. Then Red heard some riders move away. The talk below got louder amongst those left.

"Have another drink, gents!" That was Fortmann.

"You're a real gent, Fortmann," somebody else said. "And I'd heard you was stringing along with that Blacky Forell."

"Well, I did work for him—but for just a short spell, Willkins," Fortmann came back. "Drink hearty, gents!"

That went on for some time. Then it grew quieter below. Red must have

dozed. When he opened his eyes at the creak of boots on the floor, it was to find Fortmann standing over him. The one-armed man held a Bowie knife.

"Quiet," he warned. Then, to Red's amazement, he bent and cut the rawhide at his ankles and wrists. Red wondered who was locoed or if it could be a dream. But then the one-armed man helped him to his feet. Red swayed like a drunkard at first

"What's the game?" he finally asked.

"It's up to you whether or not you can escape," Fortmann whispered. "I got those who're left here pretty orey-eyed downstairs."

Red was suspicious, thinking of the Mexican custom of the Ley del Fuego, the Law of Fire. Of the trick of leading a prisoner into thinking he can escape so you have an excuse to gun him down.

"It's no trick," Fortmann said hurriedly. "I think you're playing straight—and that Speyer would like to, too. And there's due to be trouble in Succara tonight—bad trouble. There's also the girl to be considered. Here's your guns." He produced Red's weapons from his waistband. "I can't help you get out because—well, because I'm playing a bigger game. You'll find a coupla saddled ponies in the woods behind the house here."

"What?" Red was able to stand by himself then. It was still unbelievable.

"Get riding," Fortmann said. "Get out while you can. And stay off the trail you came up by. Jarris might run into you there. Cut up into the hills and get back that way. I'll say you worked yourself loose somehow and I came up and you got the drop on me."

"What's the trouble due in Succara?" Red asked.

THE POWERFUL Fortmann clutched Red's arm. "Give this message to Speyer. Jarris and Selvin with their gun slicks mean to jump Blacky Forell sometime tonight. They'll get him—or run him out; either way they'll be bosses of the town then instead of Speyer. Tell that to Stach. Now get the girl and make your break. This is Stach's chance to prove it if he's shooting on the level. I'm giving him that chance, Lindsay. Now—ride. But first slap me a light one over the head with your gun—enough to make a mark. After all, I gotta claim I was knocked unconscious."

Red was still amazed as he complied. Fortmann winced, then lowered himself to the floor.

"I'll be seeing you again—mebbe tonight," he said.

Red moved carefully out the doorway. The other door was partially open. Johnie Drews stood just inside it. The unpredictable Fortmann had already freed her. She stepped out. Red instinctively dropped a hand on her shoulder, delighted she was all right. They stood that way a moment. Then she kissed him quickly. "All right," she whispered.

He moved in front of her and started down the stairs. "We go out the back way," he murmurred.

She nodded. They got to the bottom, to the little hallway. Two men sat on the boxes at the table in the front room, one slumped with his head on the table. The other hummed drowsily as he held an empty tin cup, eyes closed. They went down the hall into the kitchen at the back. The rear door stood open.

"Hey, who was that?" one of the men called from the front.

It startled her so that she stumbled on the broken-down backstep and fell. Red bent to help her up, and it caught him off guard as Willkins stepped from the saplings out back of the house.

"Thought I heard some ponies out back here!" he roared.

Then his guns were talking. Red flung himself to one side to get her out of the line of fire. A slug just nicked the flesh of his forehead, but it was enough to draw blood that ran into his eyes, blinding him for the moment. He fired with his right gun, the only one he had drawn, and missed. He stumbled over a root and fell. But he was smart enough to roll the instant he struck the earth.

Two of Willkins' bullets dug fur-

rows in the earth beside him. Then Red Cully came to a sitting position, and with that cool speed and nerve he had reacquired since working under Speyer, he whipped his weapon level. He fired once, just nicked Willkins in the calf.

But it broke the latter's nerve. Willkins tried to swing back amongst the saplings, shooting high in his hurry as he retreated. And Red's next bullet took him dead center through the chest. He went down like a pole-axed animal, rolling backward into the high grass. Red rose and walked over to where he'd fallen. There was no need for further worry. The man who'd sold out Stach Speyer had played his last Judas trick in the game of life; he'd been killed immediately.

Red grabbed Johnie by the arm as she stood shaken by the sight of violent death, guided her into the grove of trees as one of the orey-eyed gents from the front of the house lurched into the back doorway. They found the ponies in a tiny hollow and swung up. As they bolted away, Red was still wondering what Fortmann's game was.

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THEY cut up into the foothills to the west of the old rancho, then turned southward in the lengthening shadows toward Succara. Johnie knew the country and found a cart trail. They were both too weary and spent to do much talking. Red told her about Fortmann, about his warning of trouble.

It was almost midnight when they struck into Succara by the longer route than the trail across the range they'd taken out. They went down the side street and slipped around behind the jailhouse. Stach himself answered her knock at the back door, looking like a man who died several times over. He was haggard, hollow-eyed, whiskey on his breath. He had not gotten the message she'd left at the hotel. When he'd returned the night before and found them missing as well as Toby Barron, he'd figured one of his enemies had gotten them. He clasped her in his arms, murmurring her name repeatedly.

It was torture for Red to watch it.

They told him the story of what had happened. Then Red told him of Fortmann and his warning of trouble. Stach's hand tightened on the glass on his desk. He was suspicious. "Selvin was out there with Jarris, you say, Red? Then they must have hooked up. But what is this Fortmann's game?"

"Danged if I know."

"Maybe it's some trick," the ex-gambler said. "They'll be tough together, Selvin and his gun slicks with those toughs Jarris has." His eyes slid around in his head, and Red noticed he avoided looking at the exhausted girl who sat slumped in a chair. But her eyes were on Stach, watching him closely. "Maybe they've pulled a deal with Blacky."

The woman said, "You've got to face them and stop them before they get him, Stach. You know that. If they succeed, they'll rule this town. Things'll be worse than ever."

Stach muttered, "Blacky wouldn't save my hide. I don't crave to die for him either." He looked up at her. "Johnie, I've tried here. Tried to do what I promised."

"And now you're going to back down?" she threw at him.

His mouth jerked. "Look, Johnie, dying isn't a nice thing. I've told you about that chunk of dinero I've got in the bank across the State line. We can leave. We—"

"No Stach," she said.

"I broke up the Waters' outfit; I brought in the other marshal's killer; I almost had Jarris whipped. Selvin I had on the run—until he threw in with Jarris. Now the game's turned; the odds are all against me. Let Blacky Forell take care of himself. The whole thing is probably a locoed story anyway. And—"

"No, Stach," she said again. "If you

want me to respect you, you've got to stay and fight! That's all. And you didn't break up Blaclky Forell's outfit either. You have a job to do here. Stay and do it—or go away—alone."

The haggard ex-gambler turned even grayer. His eyes pulled into his head like those of a wounded animal for a moment. Red Cully knew then how much the seemingly cold-blooded man adored this woman. Stach said: "I've got evidence against Blacky for some of the things he's pulled here, got it in writing in the hotel safe. I could write back word on that to the lawman after we leave, Johnie. I—"

She shook her head. "*We* don't leave—that way, Stach. If you cut and run now, you know the Selvin-Jarris setup will have Succara under their thumb. If you stay for the showdown, then I go with you. Otherwise..."

He finished his drink, then rose to buckle on his gun-belt. "All right; I face it." He nodded to Red. "We better get over and see Blacky and make plans. It'll be a tough fight if they come in."

THE TWO men went out. Down the main line and up the side street to the eating place where Blacky stayed. Stach said:

"I could have taken that stagecoach dinero and ridden outa here a rich man—and alive in the bargain. Now..." He broke off.

Blacky was inside at a table drinking java as usual, several of his gun toughs around him. He glared stonily as Red and Stach came in.

"What happened to that stagecoach dinero?" he bit off. "You been hiding out from me all day, Speyer."

Stach drew himself up. "My girl's been missing; she just got back. Jarris grabbed Toby Barron from the jail last night. I've had my hands full. And I don't take orders from any man, either. Now I got some bad news and—"

"Bad news, eh?" Blacky let his eyes slide around over his gunhands, winked at Gunner Smiggs. He held the odds now with just Red and Stach against his spread. "Suppose you lost the dinero, eh, Stach? That the bad news, huh?" He pointed at Red. "Your man had the money sack."

Stach shook his head, lying slickly. "He had a sack, but there was no dinero in it. That was a dummy pouch. The real one was hidden in the stage. We missed it, Blacky. Now—"

Blacky stood up quickly. "I think you're double-crossing me, Stach." Red stains of anger appeared on Stach's cheeks. One of his hands began to slide over his waistcoat. Two of Blacky's men dropped hands to gun butts. Red had his gun a couple of inches out of its holster.

"Don't try for one of your stached hideout weapons," Blacky warned.

"I want to see that dinero, my share of it, Stach," Blacky went on. "And if I don't—"

Then Red cut in, remembering their mission in coming there. "Listen, you danged lunkheads! There's liable to be trouble tonight. Selvin and Sam Jarris are headed in to jump you, Blacky."

Blacky eyed Red, obviously not believing him. "Who's side are you on, Lindsay? Did you sell out to Stach? That's just a story to make me forget the dinero for now."

Red tried to tell him, to explain how he'd been a prisoner of Sam Jarris' that day. "You know Fortmann, you told me. He was there. He warned me. Selvin and Jarris have teamed up to bust you, then Stach. They—"

"I don't believe it," Blacky yelled. "This is a double-cross. I aim to see that dinero, Stach."

"I haven't got it," Stach snapped back. "And this is no story of Red's. He was out there and got captured. He—"

Blacky went for his holster. A split second later, Stach pulled a .32 from under his coat. They both fired and missed.

THEN IT happened. There was a shout from out front and then the bunch of two gun reports. The next

moment, Rigney, one of Blacky's other gunhands, staggered through the door. He was gripping a wounded arm already running red. "Boss, Selvin and Jarris—they're out there with their snakes! They're coming for you. They—" Then lead raked through the doorway, through the front windows, blasting the place. A man a few feet from Blacky screamed a curse as he was hit. Selvin and Jarris had arrived.

It was Red Cully who reacted first. Twisting, he slung up his drawn Colts and sent a shot through the lamp hung from the ceiling. It extiguished it, putting the little place in darkness. From out in the road, gun muzzles slammed red fangs of flame at the restaurant.

"We got to stand together, Blacky," Stach yelled.

"All right," Blacky answered. He moved forward as one of the men got the door shut. But both the front windows were shattered by then, and the flimsy door began to break up with the combined outfits in the road pouring their fire into it. Men were triggering from the shadows, from behind trees. A couple worked in from the side to drop below the windows and shoot snap-shots over the sills. It seemed as if Hell had blown open its back door.

Red timed one of those men crouched just outside, when he came up the next time, Red aimed carefully. The man went hurtling backward, hit, then went ducking across the road. Three-four gents tried to rush the door. Smiggs went down as the door sagged back on shattered hinges. But the ones outside were forced to retreat. A big rock was thrown at the door, knocking it down completely.

Blacky was cursing as he ordered a man back to guard the rear. But it seemed only a matter of time. There was a pack outside. Red thought of that as he reloaded mechanically. They'd be trapped like rats. Practically were already. And it was because Stach and Blacky had not trusted each other.

There was a breakoff in the firing. But it only spelled a new rush from outside as they reorganized. In the lull, Red spoke to Stach.

"We ain't got a chance here. We—"

The man in the kitchen shouted that gents were already swinging around out there. His gun spoke once.

Stach said quietly, "I know."

"Our only chance is to get out the back before they get it ringed in," Red went on. "Then to slip down behind houses a way—"

"We'd never escape," Stach said. "If these snakes win, they'd comb the country till found us."

Red nodded. That was true enough. "I didn't say escape. If we slipped down behind some houses, then came out in the road, we might jump 'em from behind."

Stach didn't answer for a moment. "That'd take a heap of nerve."

"It's our only chance." They were firing from the road again, more methodically now.

"All right," Stach said.

THE TWO of them moved rearward. Red bumped an upset table, then they were back in the kitchen of the eating place. The man at the door there opened it warily for them. There was a heap of tin cans just outside it. The two crouched there a moment. Then a figure poked his head and shoulders around the rear corner of the place. Big Red leaped and slashed down with a gun barrel. The man curled up in some dried grass.

Crouched low among the grass and scattered clumps of brush the pair moved out into the yard, past a little outbuilding. From over to the left an unseen gunman threw lead at the kitchen window. Red and Stach veered around to their right. Then they were out of the yard, darting along a fence of the place next door. They hunkered down from behind some empty packing cases as a man called to them. But he evidently took them for some of his own bunch. No lead kicked their way.

They worked on, passing behind a pole-log cabin that was a butcher's. Then behind a little house, Red lead-

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ing the way. They turned and went up along side it toward the street. Just as Red peered out another rush started on Blacky's place.

"Now," Red called. He sprang out across the rickety wooden sidewalk into the moonlight of the open road.

Somebody on the other side of it across from the eating place spotted them right off and bawled. Then Red's Colt barked and the gent was staggering back behind a tree. Red Cully and Stach Speyer strode down the side street, abreast, a few feet apart. This was their big play, their last if it failed to succeed. Both men held their fire for some seconds. And then they threw down on the pack seeking to rush the open doorway of Blacky's place.

One man sank. Another got hit from the rear, turned and saw them, and fled down toward the edge of the town.

But there was return fire now. Red slid behind a tree. He felt lead pluck at his coat sleeve.

"They're behind us—a whole passel of 'em!" one man shouted as he stampeded.

It was big Jarris himself who appeared from the darkness to head a charge against the intrepid pair. He came dodging down the gutter with three others. Stach had his hands full with a couple of others near the other side of the road. Red wounded one of the trio with Jarris. He saw Jarris pull up for a moment, nicked in the side. Then with a bull-like roar, he weaved in closer. And Red went stumbling out from behind the tree as lead seared the calf of his left leg.

Both men, Red and Jarris faced each other, drawing bead. They shot simultaneously. Red felt the lead fan by his cheek. Jarris went up on his toes, half twisted. Then he went down in the dust, his shoulder smashed by Red's shot.

The two others, fanned out, kept coming, tough bitten gents who fully expected to die by the gun some day anyway, Red had lost his left weapon when he was hit in the leg. He pulled the trigger on his right; it clicked empty.

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HE GOT back behind the tree to try to reload in time; it looked like the end for him.

Then out of the alley down to his left appeared the one-armed Fortmann. His single weapon roared, roared several times. One of the pair charging Red went own; the other turned tail, dodging for the shadows across the road. Fortman kept shooting at the men still throwing lead into Blacky's place. When his weapon emptied, he simply dropped it and pulled another from his waistband.

His hand clinched it, turning the tide Red and Stach had started. Men began dodging, seeking deeper darkness, fleeing for their hides.

Red leaned against the tree, thankful it was over, hardly able to believe he was still alive. He saw Stach across the road. Stach had dropped his Colts, blood dripping from a wounded wrist. Then a lean dudelike figure leaped from the porch of the house near Stach. Lucky Selvin who'd hidden out there when the going got tough. He tried to rush by Stach, shooting wildly. Stach lived up to his rep of having an ace in the hole in that moment. With his left hand, he plucked a derringer from his person; it seemed to appear by magic. And he shot Selvin dead through the head.

The last shot died out as Asa Holden and a handful of his Vigilantes rounded the corner from the main line; just behind them came Johnie Drews. She picked out Stach and Red as they started to walk up the road. "Stach, you're all right?" she cried. "And you, Red...." She paused, hesitating between the two men. Then she walked to Stach Speyer's side.

"You fellas, Blacky and your men, come outa the place," Fortmann called out. "I'm running this here show now. The fighting's over. Come

out in the name of the Law!"

"What law?" demanded Blacky from inside.

"As a special officer of the governor's staff of this state," Fortmann told him....

DOWN IN the jailhouse, Elias Fortmann showed his credentials. He had been sent down to Succara to investigate the murder of the late marshal, had come incognito.

"I asked for the assignment special," he told as he sat on a corner of the desk. "Before I lost this," and he gestured toward his stump of arm, "I was a sheriff up in Montana. Then I had to quit. But when an old friend of mine got killed in a gun ruckus in this town, I traipsed down and got the special assignment from the governor's office. Nobody else seemed to want the job."

He told how he'd come in, even passed himself as a gun tough when he worked for Blacky for a spell, then apparently hired himself out to Jarris. Jarris, his side strapped up, and Blacky both glared at the lawman as they realized how they'd been duped. Red was amazed at the story.

"A danged double-cross," Blacky spat out.

"That's the way you have to play it in this town," Fortmann told him in that hard-bitten voice.

Jarris said, "What are *your* charges, anyway? You're making big talk."

"My charge against you is murder, Jarris. You shot and killed Toby Barron out behind the shed at the Morton rancho last night. You aimed to prevent Speyer from finding him and trying him.

"He was a murderer, wasn't he?"

Fortmann shook his head. "No. Neither he nor his brother killed Marshall Phillips. So you're going to stand trial for murder."

As Jarris turned sallow, Stach Speyer asked who did.

Fortmann put his harsh stare on Blacky Forell. "I'm charging you with Phillips' death. You were the one who spread the story it was the Barrons, but you were there and gunned Phillips in the back. Then you tried to bring in the Barrons yourself because you were afeared of being suspected."

Blacky tried to put a sneer around the cigaret hanging in his face. "Try to prove it."

"That gunman, Smiggs of yours, I got upstairs. He's wanted in Montana. He was there, but he doesn't want to have to stand trial for murder himself; he'll talk."

Blacky came half out of his chair, stabbing for his holster before he remembered the Vigilantes had removed his weapons. His mouth tore. Then he began to spit out words in a torrent.

"I'll talk, too; I'm not taking this alone." He pointed at Stach standing beside Johnie Drews. "This was all a plan for a big double-cross. Stach there was working with me. We were going to rule this town. We planned and started that shooting scrape down in Whiskey Row."

"Which wasn't such a bad job," Fortmann said. "It ran some of the rats out, busted Pop Waters' power."

Blacky scowled, hate in the eyes fastened on the cool Stach. "We, him and me and this Red here—we did the actual robbing of the stage."

"The dinero reached the bank the next morning," Fortmann came back.

Blacky's jaw shot open. Then he was whipped with nothing more to say. Fortmann turned to Red who sat on a bench with his bound-up leg in front of him.

"You did a pretty good job around here especially in that fight you made tonight, my friend. I'm appointing you temporary marshal till an election can be held. And I know all of the Vigilantes'll vote for you."

RED FLUSHED with pride and caught Johnie looking at him with admiration. Then, when they were taking the two main prisoners, Sam Jarris and Blacky, upstairs he found himself alone with her. He hobbled over and took her by the shoulders. "Johnie, I love you; and I think you love me. Are you still going to marry Stach?"

She lifted her face to Red. "Thank you for that, Red. Thank you. I'll al-

ways remember it. But I promised to go with Stach if he played out his string as a lawman here. He did. I'll go with him—or wait for him if they hold him. I promised. And he needs me. You don't, Red. I think you're going to be a big man in this town before very long." Then she kissed him.

Red held her a moment, touching her hair, seeking to imprint the sensation of her in his arms on his memory for all time.

"Stach needs me," she said again. "He's weak inside; he'd go crooked again without me."

Stach and Fortmann came downstairs with some of the Vigilantes. There was still a crowd in front of the jailhouse, amazed at what had happened with such cyclonic force in their town that night. The Vigilante group left. Stach Speyer pulled out his gun, dropped it on the desk, plucked three derringers from various parts of his person and placed them beside the Colts. Then he unpinned the lawman's badge and faced Fortmann with a crooked grin.

"I reckon you'll want to hold me too, Fortmann."

The one-armed lawman cocked an eyebrow. "Your hands haven't been too clean, Speyer; but you have no killings that I know of against your record though. Your methods as temporary marshal ain't been exactly sweet. But—"

"Yes?" Johnie asked breathlessly.

"Speyer I place you under arrest on your own recognizance. I won't look you up. The back door of the jail will be unlocked tonight." He turned to the girl. "I suggest you have a couple of fast horses out there, young lady—and that you marry this gent in the next town tomorrow. I sleep real heavy around dawn—which is a good time to go."

RED WAS UP to see them depart from behind the jailhouse the next day before sun-up. He was still surprised at her belief that Stach had played his marshal's role straight while pretending to be ready to take over the town. They shook hands. "Red, let me tell you something. I lied to you about the real Big Red Lindsay being wanted for a shooting down on the Rio," Stach said. "He wasn't. He died a couple years ago in Mexico. I think you've earned the right to the name." Stach chuckled.

"Another thing I didn't tell you. Eddie Sorle didn't die. He's hidden down at the doc's house. I faked the burial to scare the daylights out of Jarris and maybe force his hand."

Red stared, once again amazed at the ex-gambler's daring and nerve. "You sure forced his hand, Stach. He danged nigh had us."

"My luck always holds up, Red. So long. And good luck when you're the new marshal."

Red and Johnie shook hands stiffly. The pair quitting Sacurra for good mounted. As they rode off, Johnie glanced back, lifted her gloved hand quickly once. Red knew he'd never forget that look. He felt the sting of loneliness for some moments.

But as he turned to stride into the jailhouse, he began to whistle a little. He had, he realized, built a new life for himself....

IN OUR FEBRUARY ISSUE

Shadow Of The Silver Kid

BRAND NEW BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

by T. W. Ford

Man Of Peace

By C. C. Staples

(Author of "One Candidate for Sheriff")

Tom Packard was no gun-fighter, even less of a match for the slick Pat Dolan than old Will Rains. But Tom knew that he'd have to side Rains in his fight, even though Packard was a man of peace, himself.

STANDING ON the porch of his General Store in Prairie City's main street, Tom Packard could plainly feel the tenseness of the Saturday crowd of cow men, as it milled on the plank sidewalk under the hot Arizona sun, and swarmed nervously in and out of saloons and stores. It was the shoot-off between Will Rains and Pat Donlan that had brought ranchers from miles around, into

town. And Tom Packard knew that every person in that crowd of cow men was betting that nothing short of a miracle could save old Will Rains from the greedy, expert guns of Pat Donlan when the show-down came off today between these two. That is, unless Sheriff White took over and stopped it all. But, after all, that would be only temporary. A man had to fight when his reputation was threatened, when he was called a cow rustler and a cheat. And old man Rains had certainly called Pat Donlan those things, before witnesses, and he fully expected to back up his talk through gun smoke.

But between old Rains and Pat Donlan, it was not a question of who was fastest on the draw—who was the best shot with a six-gun. That was something that everybody knew already. Maybe, in the past when Rains was younger, it would have been different. But now, at his age his case looked bad—hopeless.

Sheriff White had even gone to Pat Donlan and told him he would jail him for murder if he killed Rains. Pat had replied calmly to this threat, "Thanks. I'll take care of that, Sheriff. I shore will."

Tom Packard's anxious glance went often to the north end of Main Street. That was where old Will Rains would first appear as he drove into town. Tom was hoping desperately that Rains' pretty little blond daughter Mary Lu would not be with him today. He wanted to spare her all he could.

Everybody knew that tall, slender young Tom Packard and Mary Lu Rains were sweethearts, that their wedding day was only a month away. And yet, Tom stood calmly, apparently unconcerned, drawing on a smoke while time raced, bringing nearer with each tick of the clock, the murder of old man Rains, the father of the girl he was so soon to wed. Yes, it would be murder; nothing less.

Leaning easily against an awning post, talking to big, bushy headed Tip Reynard, Tom Packard greeted man after man in the crowd on the sidewalk, only to have them, almost without exception, turn away coldly and growl disgustedly to one another. It seemed that the saddler, Tip Reynard, was Tom Packard's only real friend in all Prairie City, on this fateful day.

Tom was deeply hurt as man after man ignored him and he knew that, the minds of all these erstwhile friends of his, he was yellow, beneath their notice.

They believed that since Rains had no son, no man relatives to side him, then it was Tom Packard's place to step in, as the promised husband of the old man's daughter Mary Lu. Several of them had made that plain, and incidentally, Tom agreed with them. In his own way he was trying to make good on this obligation. But Tom's way was not the way of these ranchers. To them the only way to settle the affair was with a six-gun, and any man who scorned that method and refused to fight through gun smoke, was yellow. But, to Packard, such methods were primitive, savage, uncivilized. He was perhaps the only man in this tough little cow town of Prairie City who didn't have a six-gun strapped about his hips, this day.

IT WAS not yet ten o'clock when Packard heard the jangle of trace chains up at the north end of Main Street. He and Tip Reynard looked up quickly. Tom's pulse leaped and his blue eyes narrowed. He knew, of course, that Rains would be driving in, in his buckboard. But seeing the old man coming, ready to face Pat Donlan's guns; it was a sort of shock. Tom knew then, that if there was any slip in the plans that he had made to settle this business, Mary Lu's father was as good as dead.

"Well, there he comes, Tom," Tip Reynard grunted. "Looks like the end of the trail for the old rannyhan, the way I see it. I sure am sorry for Mary Lu. It'll about kill 'er."

"Nobody's going to get killed, Tip. You can bet on that," Tom Packard said, confidently.

Tip Reynard stared for a moment, doubt plain in his dark eyes. "Look, Tom," he said seriously. "The only thing that can save ol' Rains today—the only thing that can save Mary Lu from heart break is for hot lead to find Pat Donlan before he finds Will

Rains. I'm telling yuh, now. That's the way she is, now."

Tom Packard smiled. "Tip, you put too much faith in gun play," he said. "There's other ways to settle this argument, and I've got that all fixed. Nobody's going to get killed. Everything is going to be all right."

His scheme couldn't miss. He was sure of that. There were other ways to make an hombre harmless beside shooting the life out of him with a six-gun, if a man used his brains. For instance, he could be locked up in State Prison by due process of law.

Tom was thinking of that reward notice from an up-state law man, that he had found in Sheriff White's office, among a pile of others, a week ago. The description on the notice tallied exactly—black hair, blue-gray eyes, about five feet eight, slender, dark. And the clincher to all this: that peculiar knife scar starting at the part in Donlan's black hair and ending over his right eye

Sheriff White had admitted the night before that there could be no doubt, as he folded the notice, put it in his pocket and headed for the telegraph office down at the railroad station, to check with the up-state law man.

Old man Rain's buckboard was almost opposite the store before Tom roused himself from his satisfying thoughts. The pleasant idea was going through his mind that he would show Mary Lu he was fully capable of protecting her, even if he was not a gun man.

WHEN TOM looked up he saw that Mary Lu rode beside her father. His hand half rose to wave a greeting. But neither Mary Lu nor Will Rains even glanced in his direction. The slender, blonde girl's face was tense with worry and Rains' grim stare was straight to the front. They headed down the street for the Drover's Hotel and Rains' heavy shouldered body was hunched stolidly in his seat. He must have known that this day was likely to be his last on earth.

It cut Tom Packard deeply that Mary Lu had never once appealed to him for help or comfort since this thing came up. Her clear eyed, level glance had made it plain that she was hoping for no help from him, a man who never even carried a gun—who couldn't hit a five gallon coal oil can at fifteen yards with a forty-five. She had just looked at him when he had tried to talk to her about the duel, be of some help. But he could tell by the look in her blue eyes, what she was thinking, easily. It all hit Tom like a blow.

The girl loved him deeply—he didn't doubt that for an instance. But this was something in which he knew she felt that he was helpless. And a man likes to have the woman he is going to marry lean on him, have confidence in him. Well, when this trouble was all over, she'd see that she had made a mistake.

His spirits rose. He almost smiled. Everything was going to be all right. And he wouldn't have to take a gun and kill a man, like a barbarian, to make it so. He had that all fixed up with the Sheriff White.

"Thou shalt not kill," he said half aloud, and big Tip Reynard, standing there with him rolling a smoke, stirred and asked, "What say, Tom?"

Tom Packard reddened. "Nothing, Tip. Nothing at all. Just thinking out loud, I guess."

Tip Reynard took a long breath "Maybe I'm talkin' out of turn, Tom," he said slowly. "But seein' that you an' Mary Lu are goin' to marry, come next month, it seems like you're takin' a sort of funny stand about this murder of her paw, that's comin' off this morning. I know you ain't no gunfighter, but it looks like to me, you'd anyhow try to do something real, to stop it all. You say you got it all fixed. You act confident. But...." There was disappointment, almost an accusation in the big saddler's tone. He and Tom were fast friends.

Tom smiled. "You too, Tip? You think I'm yellow too? Well, don't you worry, Tip. Wait and see what happens. Then you'll understand."

AT THAT moment a lone rider loped easily out from behind the jail where Sheriff White had his of-

fice, and headed down Prairie City's main street toward the hotel. Dust followed him in a risen, drifting tail. It was Pat Donlan, riding in from his little spread over west of the Rains ranch.

Not many men knew Pat well. He sort of kept to himself. Had, ever since he had ridden in from up-state six months ago and bought his small ranch, paying cash for it. He had no friends in town and so he rode the length of Main Street like a stranger who had never been in the place before. People just didn't take to the lean, hard faced rider.

As Pat Donlan passed the general store he turned his head briefly and flung a short, leering grin at Tom.

Tip growled a curse, scowled at Donlan. "The danged skunk," he said. "If he kills the old man, it'll be murder." He dashed his cigarette to the street. "I don't see why that stuborn old fool Rains can't listen to reason and stay clear of Donlan. He's got Mary Lu to think of."

Tom grinned. "Nobody's going to get killed. Wait and see."

"That's what you kept saying," the big saddler growled. "But I know a killer when I see one. And that Pat is sure a bad hombre. It'll take more than brains to stop the slugs in his gun today."

Tom shrugged, stood watching Pat Donlan as he racked his horse in front of the Star Saloon, down the street a piece, on the other side, and went in through the saloon doors slowly. Ten minutes later, he strolled out again, a slim, erect, calm figure. He hitched up his crossed gun belts, leaned against an awning post and rolled a smoke with hands that were cold steady. Now and then he raised his eyes and looked keenly up and down the street as he worked at building his cigarete.

Tom Packard glanced anxiously up Main Street toward the jail where Sheriff White had his office. Surely the Sheriff must have seen Pat Donlan lope past the jail on his way into town. Surely he would be coming from his office any minute and heading down the sidewalk to where Pat lounged and smoked calmly.. Time was racing. Any minute now, Rains might step out into the street. Then the sheriff would be forever too late.

Tip Reynard nudged Tom, jerked his head toward the hotel. "Here comes ol' Rains' finish," he said tensely. "It's going to take some brain work to save him now.'

Tom looked quickly down that way. Old man Rains was coming out of the hotel door, was standing on the broad porch, his gaze steady on Pat Donlan, across the way.

The two main actors in this grim little drama were on stage. The curtain was about to go up. Deadly trouble, tragedy might break at any minute in the crash of six-guns.

Pat looked up and saw Rains, tossed his cigarette to the street and started unhurriedly down the steps toward the sidewalk. He did not move out of his calm, slow gait. .showed no more concern than if he was stepping from his cabin to get a horse to ride somewhere.

Then Mary Lu stepped quickly out onto the porch of the hotel, stood talking to the old man. He pushed her back toward the door but she clung to him, pulled him inside with her and Tom saw Pat shrug, hesitate briefly and slowly stroll back up onto the porch of the Star Saloon.

THE STREET was empty. There was not a horse or rig tied at any of the racks except Rains' buckboard and Pat Donlan's bronc. Men were standing in every doorway and window up and down Main, waiting the last act in the deadly drama that *was* about to be enacted before them.

Many of them glanced constantly up at the jail, wondering maybe, what the sheriff could be doing, not to be on hand to stop this murder. A score of them would gladly have stepped out against Donlan, but, to horn into another man's fight without cause.. well, it just was not done, that's all.

In all that crowd, Pat Donlan had not a single friend—no one who wished him luck in this fight. Yet he was as cool, calm at ease as though the men in the crowd were all lifelong friends. A dangerous man, under any condition.

There had been complete silence when Pat calmly tossed away his cigarette and strolled down from the

porch of the Star to meet his man. But when Will Rains allowed Mary Lu to lead him inside, and Pat went back to stand on the porch, a noise like the wind through the pines ran up and down Main Street as men let out pent up breath, relaxed for the time, curse quietly to themselves.

Tom Packard turned an anxious glance up toward Sheriff White's office for a minute. The Sheriff was nowhere in sight on the street. According to plan, he should have been here before this. Something had gone wrong. Some slip had occured. Tom wheeled and stared into his store. He had gotten inside, when Tip called, "Tom! Somethin' wrong! Come'ere. Some hombre runnin' from the jail. He's headin' this way on a run."

Tom Packard hurried back out onto the porch. The man, a ragged Mexican hurried up to them. "Ai Senores," hr gasped as he ran up onto the porch. "El Sheriff! He lie on the floor in the officina. Much blood on his head. Come and help him, Senores."

"Is he dead?" Tip snapped.

"No, senor. He lives. I have feel his heart. But come quick for help him.'

"Go get Doc Prentice. Pronto!" Tip ordered the man. The Mexican's news struck Tom with the force of a physical blow. Sheriff White knocked out —his head covered with blood. Tom Packard's whole, carefully laid plans to save Will Rains without a fight, was wrecked, useless.

Pat Donlan's words, when the Sheriff had threatened him with arrest, for murder if he killed Rains came back to him. "Thanks. I'll take care of all that, Sheriff. I shore will," Pat had said, quietly. Looked like he had made good on that remark.

Then Tip Reynard jabbed Tom with his elbow. "Look," the big saddler half groaned. He was pointing toward the hotel and Tom could see old man Rains, standing half through the the front door of the place, trying to push his daughter back inside. He could see Mary Lu, too, clinging desperately to her father with both arms around his neck.

A glance showed Pat Donlan, still calmly leaning a shoulder against the awning post in front of the Star Saloon, his eyes fixed on the tragic scene on the hotel porch. There was a cynical smile on his thin lipped face.

TOM WHEELED, raced into the store and made for the gun counter. Tip Reynard lumbered behind him. "Yuh'll have to hurry, boy," the big fellow growled, and as Tom snatched a gun from its case, he grabbed it. "No! Take a six-gun. He'll kill yuh before you can get in range of 'im, with that scatter gun," Tim almost shouted.

Tom Packard snatched the shot gun back savagely, started fumblingly to load it with buck shot. "Don't be a fool, Tip," he growled. "You know I couldn't hit 'im in a week, with a pistol."

Tip Reynard plunged to the door, shot a glance down the street, came running back. "The old man ain't outa the door yet," he said. He snatched the shot gun away from Tom, quickly finished loading it, handed it back. "Yuh gotta hurry," he repeated.

Tom made no reply, but grabbed the gun, cocked both hammers and raced for the back of the store.

"Where yuh goin'? This way! Yuh ain't got time to sneak on 'im," Tip yelled.

"I got to get close enough to shoot 'im with this thing," Tom yelled back waving the shot gun. He leaped through the back door, raced up the alley until he was opposite the Star Saloon. Then, crouching, he dove between two buildings and ran out into the middle of the street, the double barreled gun in both hands. "Come on, you skunk. I'm waiting," he snapped at Pat Donlan.

A gale of sound ran the street in both directions.

It was almost a cheer, as men in every door and window recognized Tom. This was more like what they expected of a man.

Pat Donlan snapped his gaze around and pushed his shoulder quickly away from the post. His hands drifted toward his twin guns, thonged low on his thighs. There was a startled look in his eyes. Then he relaxed. His sarcastic grin came back to his lean, tight-lipped face.

"Howdy, store-keep. Didn't think yuh had it in yuh," he drawled.

Suddenly his eyes narrowed to gleaming slits, he leaped clear of the awning post, his hands flashed down and up so fast that Tom coudn't follow them. Smoke bloomed from both his guns before Tom could raise his shot gun.

Tom Packard felt a heavy, numbing blow along his ribs on his right side. The force of the bullet knocked him back and one barrel of his gun roared, sending the heavy charge of buckshot into the street close in front of him. Dust flew up in a cloud, almost hiding him from Pat Donlan. Tom felt the shock of a second slug in his left shoulder. He staggered to his right, then desperately steadied himself. Another bullet from one of Pat's spitting guns plucked at his Stetson, jerked it aslant.

The shot gun came slowly to Tom's shoulder. It seemed to weigh a hundred pounds. He aimed carefully, as slugs from Pat Donlan's guns buzzed around him, jerking at his clothing. Then there was a flash, a blasting report from the shot gun and a jet of gun smoke mingled with the cloud of dust from the street.

Abruptly, Pat Donlan seemed to freeze. Then strength left him with a rush. He wavered briefly. pitched headlong down the steps to the street, lay with that peculiar inertness of the dead, half on the sidewalk, half on the steps.

Tom turned about and started for the sidewalk, his shot gun still clutched in his hands. He was weaving unsteadily from side to side, things on the street blurred in his eyes, when big Tip Reynard came charging up and grabbed him with both arms. The big fellow was inarticulate, fairly sputtering with joy and relief. All he could say was, "By hell yuh did it, boy."

Then Mary Lu swam into Tom's wavering gaze and his arms went out to her eagerly. Tears were coursing down the girl's cheeks. "Tom. Oh, Tom!" was all she could get out as Tip and a dozen others from the crowd of ranchers, wild with excitement, almost carried them both into the hotel.

STRETCHED on the bed in his room, his wounds dressed, strenght once more flowing through him, Tom felt excited, had a new confidence in himself. He had been in his first gun fight—had killed a man, like a savage. But instead he was exultant, strangely buoyant. Right then he decided to buy a gun and belt, get Tip Reynard to help him and practice every day until he became expert with the weapon. There was something to this business of carrying a gun and being able to look any man in the eye, after all.

"Thou shalt not kill, huh?" Tip Reynard grunted, from where he leaned against a window frame in the room. "Well, I reckon the Almighty'll agree with me that there's exceptions to that order. Man. Man! I sure thought he had yuh for a minute Tom."

"Son," old Will Rains said, speaking slowly, reluctantly, as he came into the room. What yuh did out there in the street brings my years home to me. Hadn't thought much about it before. Guess I'm sure gettin' old." He paused, squared his shoulders. "But you listen to me now. you young squirt; ten years ago I would have killed any man who horned into my fight. Now, though—well—thank yuh, son." The old man turned, went slowly into the hall and down the stairs, a strange new, dejected slope to his shoulders.

Mary Lu's eyes were misted with happiness as she sat beside Tom's bed, her soft hand stroking his forehead. She had both of her men safe, now. Everything was going to be all right.

THE END

★ ★

That Wash Creek Heller

By Cliff Campbell

(Author of "The Long Trail")

Wash Creek had its share of tough hombres, all right; but there was none of them to compare with that wild-cat younker, Peggy Bailey!

IF BOB OWEN hadn't seen his mistake on the first hard spank he took and dropped the younker with startled suddenness his red-headed skull would nave been split by the keen-edged, two-bitted axe

that whizzed past his ear. The axe handle hummed from the force with which the blade bit into the knobby trunk of the tree less than three feet away.

"You damn' bully!" sputtered the spanked younker, scrambling up to show a scratched dirty face framed by a loosening tangle of glossy black hair. "Wait'll Pa Dan finds this out! He'll cut out your gizzard an' chase you to hell an' gone back over the summit where you come from! You went an' tore my—my—"

Bob Owen missed seeing what he might have torn. He had seen enough before the flying axe had come close to clipping off one ear to have stopped the spanking, anyway. For in pulling the younker out of the first and only rare apricot tree he had succeeded in growing to the fruiting stage. Bob Owen had ripped one leg of the fruit-thief's denim overalls. He didn't have to look twice to know the exposed and curvesome leg couldn't be mistaken for the bony shank of a boy.

And it required but one glance to identify the huge, hairy-armed axe thrower as the one man in the world who would have welcomed the sudden and permanent removal of Bob Owen from among the living. He was Chuck Purvis, woods boss for Big Dan Bailey's timber crew, and he had missed by five minutes buying the last stand of white cedar at the head of the famous and often bloody Wash Creek.

Moreover, that 300-year-old strip of white cedar was the only stand of this variety of highly valuable tree in the world, except for another small forest strangely spotted in a remote mountain section of Japan. For a mere $12,000. his last money from a small inheritance, Bob Owen had suddenly found himself the owner of the Wash Creek trees. That had happened some six months ago.

The killing vindictiveness of the 230-pound woods boss who had just missed by inches the head of the lean, light-bodied Bob Owen had been aroused to its fullest by Chuck Purvis having held an optional contract with a big battery company to deliver that same stand of white cedar at a price close to $200,000. That he had secretly double-crossed Dan Bailey and he had planned to use Big Dan's crew for the final cleanup hadn't made Chuck Purvis any the less killer-mad on learning young Bob Owen had bought the white cedar at the tax auction by the pure damn' luck of wandering into the deal on no more than having taken on a couple of swigs of redeye too many.

Bob Owen had been a tough young tree topper in the bigger woods when an Uncle Andrew had willed him several thousands. Bob was up in Portland tossing it away. He had strayed into the auction room thinking it was a bar. He had walked out minus $12,000, his last, and owning a coastal Oregon stand of white cedar.

The picture of a mountainside above this Wash Creek showed what looked like a collection of overgrown Christmas trees, all perfectly conical and exactly alike. The white cedar proved to be exactly as depicted.

Bob Owen didn't know then he had invested in a quick fortune. Also that he had made an impacable enemy. A few months had passed and he now knew what he had and of a wide open chance that he had to be on his toes if he wanted to stay alive.

THERE WAS reason for anger behind that curiously mistaken spanking. Within the past week the Bob Owen crew had lost six of its best cutters and sawmen. Two had been killed and four crippled by the snapping of a high line cable. It had been found that several strands of the cable had been cut, but proving it was impossible.

About this same time, shortly before that single misguided spank, Bob Owen had been warned that Chuck Purvis was waiting only for an excuse to spike-stomp his freckled, snubnosed face and kick a few ribs loose from his backbone.

This brought no more than a dangerous glint to the former topper's snapping blue eyes, and changed over his usually twisted smile to a tight set of his mouth. Tree-topping had given Bob Owen a pair of fast hands that came in handy as hell in a tight.

Because he was centering upon Big Chuck Purvis and a bony, hawknosed roughneck beside him, Bob Owen didn't give much attention to the promise of the spanked girl younker that his gizzard would be cut out. But the raging girl's free and easy handling of the hard lingo of the timber camps pulled his eyes around for a quick look. He could see nothing attractive in the dirty, scratched face. Widely spaced brown eyes looked at him with a stony stare. It came to Bob Owen then whom he had, well, spanked once anyway.

His anger blazed into words.

"You're—why, dammit! How'd I know Big Dan Bailey's girl would be traipsin' around with these roughneck lumberjacks? I guess I made a mistake, haulin' you out of that tree and givin' you whatfor. But you're old enough for Big Dan to have you in school. You learn the wrong things here, what with the drinkin' and cussin' and fightin' of a timber camp. Seems you've picked up the cussin' part quick enough. I'm marchin' you straight to Big Dan to tell him—"

"Ha!" Her interruption was sudden and contemptuous. "Chuck! Jerry! You seen—saw it! Bob Owen nursin' a damn' apricot tree that you've been sayin' all the time was planted by old Loker on Pa Dan's strip!"

Bob Owen pivoted in time to see Chuck Purvis walking toward him, flexing his big hands that looked as if they could pull down a white cedar without help of an axe. Bob Owen had one look at the close-set eyes of the bony figure called, "Jerry," and he had a fair idea that Jerry was ready to side the woods boss, fair or foul.

The hard calculation in the eyes of Chuck Purvis gave him the appearance of suffering with a continuous, vicious hangover. It was in harmony with his broad, flat nose and thick, set lips.

"I seen what the smart son done to you, Peggy!"

Purvis walked toward Bob Owen with the slow, stalking movement of a coast range cougar. His big fists swung loosely and he was too sure of himself. Bob Owen noticed that the loose-jointed Jerry kept close alongside his boss. Broken bones and a new shape of face were the least Bob Owen could expect.

PERHAPS? It was the sound like a snicker from the apparently tough Peggy that touched Bob Owen off. His nearest men at work were half a mile up Wash Creek. They were skidding peeled white Cedar into one of the two ponds at the head of the only stream in Oregon where the water of the rainy season could be stored in ten ponds of nearly lake-size.

Several companies had worked out nearly all of the white cedar down toward Pacific Port, below Marshfield. The system was made to order. Wash Creek was a series of benches for more than fifty miles. Dams had cut off each bench. At the end of the rainy season in the spring, several million tons of water were impounded behind the dams.

During the three or four dry months of summer and fall the companies worked their white cedar cut down into the series of ponds. The floodgates were so built that the sudden release and pressure from the highest pond automatically opened all others as the rush of water and logs reached them, affording cheap floating of all the white cedar to the cutting mill at the ocean port.

This wood was the only known type in the world that provided thin, impervious insulation sheets in batteries. The trees were of small size, but each one could be cut into hundreds of strips priced far below the cost of rubber or other insulation.

Hearing that jeering sound from the girl Peggy, Bob Owen figured only upon keeping as many bones

intact as possible. The huge Chuck Purvis was notorious for using his spiked boots and Bob Owen weighed little more than half of the steel-muscled poundage of the woods boss.

"All he has to do is to get me into a bear hug and I'll probably break up like some China doll," thought Bob Owen.

The roughneck called Jerry had shifted to one side. That put him in position for a sudden flank attack if it became necessary. Bob Owen could see that the hands of Purvis were as tough as the wood of his peeaveys or axes.

"I knew the time would come," growled Purvis. "Make you a bid. The same even twelve thousand you paid for thet white cedar."

Owen tightened his mouth and rubbed at his chin. He had his hands as if believing Purvis would open up by smashing at his face. The graveled highway following Wash Creek down to Myrtle Point and on to the ocean bore no travel.

The girl Peggy was making clucking noises to encourage the fight.

"You know what, Chuck?" she said suddenly. "He called me a damned thievin' brat. Said I was spoilin' a tree to fill my greedy belly. Wait'll Pa Dan hears he said I didn't have folks with sense enough to give me my needin's at home and I wouldn't have the brain for it, anyway. Slicked you outta them trees, he said."

Bob Owen, with his 150 pounds to match the crushing weight of 230, all hard muscles on Purvis, couldn't have got a better break than the daughter of Big Dan egging the woods boss to fight. That fellow Jerry was taller than Bob Owen and looked as tough as whang leather. Moreover, Jerry had the haft of a knife showing in his belt.

Jerry's little eyes sparked with anticipation of what he was all set to see happen. Chuck Purvis was but a four-foot jump from Bob Owen. Purvis was discounting one point in favor of this red-haired fellow who looked like a bantam facing an eagle.

Bob Owen was a tree topper. Purvis was a faller and sawman. Anyone having watched a topper at work would understand. Slung by catch straps in slender tops of swaying trees, a topper uses his leathery legs and his speed to dodge back-firing tops he has cut loose. His legs are always young, for tree toppers have a habit of dying so suddenly that insurance agents avoid them like a plague.

CHUCK PURVIS was so sure of himself that he halted, crouching to throw his weight forward. "You'll damn' well wish you'd took my bid, you redheaded bantam," he taunted. "Them logs you've chopped ain't goin' down Wash Creek until I give the word."

Purvis may have imagined that his jump was agile, but he was much too big, heavy on his boot spikes to move fast. Bob Owen acted upon his own sudden notion.

The topper owner of the white cedar carried the fight forward on those legs that had been toughened by tree-climbing slings. And the girl Peggy, cried out, but she was too late.

The elongated Jerry was perhaps four feet to one side of Purvis, his tongue licking at his thin lips. He didn't have time to pull his tongue back into his mouth.

Bob Owen jumped from his toes apparently upon Purvis, but he seemed to twist after he left the ground. The solid smack of his fist that clipped off the tip of Jerry's tongue and loosened his teeth was satisfying.

Chuck Purvis had lunged ahead to meet that jump of Bob Owen. The woods boss went to his knees, cursing wildly, as his big fists fanned the side diving topper. Bob Owen rammed another blow so deep into Jerry's lanky belly that he could feel the roughneck's backbone take the impact of it.

"You damn' fools, both of you!" screamed the dirty-faced Peggy, the evidently log camp toughened girl child of Big Dan Bailey. "Get him, Chuck! You oughtta been lookin' for some smart trick like that—quick! He's cuttin' Jerry's throat!"

Bob Owen heard the girl's warning and he was mad enough over what had happened to his own crew to have done as she said, but he had snatched the doubled Jerry's knife from his bet with another notion. He slammed the heavy bone haft across Jerry's hawkish nose, breaking it and hoping it would heal up as flat as that of Chuck Purvis.

However that might be, the roughneck Jerry went down upon his hunkers. Bob Owen didn't turn quick enough. It felt as if a falling log had pounded upon his skull as Purvis put all of his weight on one driving fist.

Bob Owen kept his senses, but went to his belly and his back-bone appeared to crack as Purvis landed upon him with both knees. Purvis made a slight mistake getting both feet off the ground. For the topper had dodged too many back-lashing tree tops to fail in split-second action that jerked the giant Purvis on over his head.

Chuck Purvis roared as his own weight drove his already too-flat face into the ground. Bob Owen came up with catlike quickness, slamming a fist to the head of the woods boss as he lifted his face. The topper guessed correctly he had broken his hand on that hard head. The pain rippled all the way to the side of his neck.

Also Bob Owen lost the advantage of his first clever shift in the attack to the bony Jerry. Coming up from the side Jerry kicked the topper on the side of the head. Bob Owen went down, but rolled and came up, flashing his left fist to Jerry's face twice so fast the roughneck could neither see nor dodge it

The topper heard Peggy cry out, "You fish-brained ruckers! Get the damn', redheaded dude between you! Who the hell said you knowed—knew how to fight! Like this!"

Maybe it was the surprise or possibly Bob Owen figured he wasn't entitled to more than one spank when it comes to a woman critter, but Peggy Bailey caught him squarely in his resisting stomach with her lowered head. It might be she wouldn't scale more than one-ten or one-twenty, but it was enough with her straight-diving young body behind it to slam the topper back into the big hands of Chuck Purvis.

The grip of the woods boss was smartly placed on both sides of Bob Owen's neck, and the hard thumbs cracked at least one clavicle and twisted the other collarbone out of shape. The topper had a tough few seconds, trying to pull breath into his lungs and use his one good fist low down on Purvis's belly.

But it was no good. Bob Owen went to his knees then to his stomach on the ground, vaguely aware that his head was being rocked both ways by Jerry's bony fists. Although nearly out, the topper was making one desperate effort to protect his face from the caulks on the boots of Chuck Purvis.

FROM THERE on everything was partly faded out. That he would have to take boots either on his face or in his ribs he had every reason to believe. Through one blurred eye he saw big Chuck Purvis lift a number twelve foot.

Bob Owen was past the stage of flinching from probable pain. He knew something of busted ribs on his tree topping job. But the big boot was being aimed high up.

He thought it couldn't be Peggy Bailey's voice he heard then.

"No, Chuck! Dammit! They've got a new law dog ridin' Wash Creek an' a judge that Pa Dan's dickering with for a new log cut come next year! Don't, Chuck!"

"To hell with the law an' what your Pa Dan's wantin' after I've grabbed off this last chunk of white cedar!" bellowed Purvis. "I've been honin' for this all summer! Get back!"

Bob Owen pulled the muscles of his stomach in tight. He was as set as he could be for the crash of the heavy boot under his armpit. It sounded as if a .30—40 had exploded.

"Why, damn you to—"

Bob Owen saw Chuck Purvis half turn over then fall on his side. The woods boss was up almost instantly,

but he was yelling and holding his right ankle.

From one side came a thin, oldish voice.

"You ain't kilt an' you ain't lost nothin' but the heel off your boot! But if you two tin pants jaspers don't start down that hill 'fore I count five, I'm sure as hell gonna rip them same pants where settin' down won't be any fun when you eat your grub! An' take that frowsy-headed gal critter along!"

"Why, you low-down, likker guzzlin' old coot! Big Dan'll run you off Wash Creek perm'nent for this!"

That was from Chuck Purvis, but he was on the move. Bob Owen pulled himself up, looking at the shrunken, ragged little fellow who was sitting comfortably upon a flat rock, cradling the .30—40 Winchester repeater over his knee. If any living man had ever met up with old "Whiskey Sam" when he had been sober, Bob Owen hadn't heard of it. But he could drive a nail with a rifle at fifty yards.

"Sam!" Bob Owen's voice was brittle. "I told you—but what's the use? You found that new case of redeye or you wouldn't have that rifle. Thanks, anyway."

Cursing and limping, Chuck Purvis was going down the hill with Jerry. The girl Peggy hesitated as if to argue, but all she said was, "You damn well asked for it you redheaded tree thief, but I ain't— I'm not so hellish mean as to want your ribs kicked in. But Pa Dan'll slap your ears down when he hears what happened."

The topper couldn't work up much of a grin across his battered mouth, but his blue eyes were smiling some as he said. "Anyway it was some spank. An' Big Dan will be seein' me after supper. I'm coming down to your camp to tell him it's about time a smart, little heller your age had ought to be sent to some good school. You might tell Big Dan I'll be along, and—"

"Try it an' you get yourself beat to death."

The girl had a more mature figure than Bob Owen had imagined as she followed the cursing Chuck Purvis and Jerry.

Bob Owen put a cold eye upon the s m a l l, age-drawn face of old Whiskey Sam.

"I told all of you we'd keep all gunplay out of this," stated Bob Owen. "An' that .30—40 was locked up with the whiskey."

The little, old man stroked his ragged beard thoughtfully.

"It'd been damn' tough on the ribs if I hadn't fell down and busted through the door into that cellar," said Whiskey Sam.

"And where'd you get hold of the likker that stumbled you onto that cellar door," demanded Bob Owen.

"Dangnation, boss! Wasn't there a couple-a cases of redeye in the cellar with that .30—40 layin' across 'em?"

Bob Owen gave it up. Whiskey Sam could smell rotgut if it was buried in the middle of a graveyard.

"A'right for this time, Sam," admitted the topper. "Looks as if I might be needin' my ribs all in proper pieces. Sam, what could Chuck Purvis do to keep us from getting our white cedar cut down to the Pacific mill?"

Whiskey Sam said, "You meanin' you ain't figure that out. There's always been an agreement that all the cedar runners have their cuts in the ponds ready for the one flood. Elsewise there ain't no more water for floatin' the sticks until the next rainy season, and sometimes that don't come along for weeks."

BOB OWEN digested that a moment. "But our contract calls for the cedar by the end of this dry season. Anyway, we've got the bulge on Purvis, seeing we have the two top ponds. When we cut loose all the others will be carried along."

Whiskey Sam was so disgusted he hauled a bottle out and took himself a long drink.

"Which is forninst the rules, boss.

But supposin', just supposin' Big Dan Bailey and all the others had their logs suddenly turned loose. We've the top ponds, but they don't hold enough water to get the logs much more than out of the hole they're in now."

"Hell, Sam, take another drink," grunted Bob Owen. "Big Dan ain't that kind of a potato. Leastwise, I'm goin' over to give Big Dan some advice about schoolin' that wild heller of his, and I'll bring it up tonight."

Whiskey Sam almost emptied the bottle then gulped.

"You're gonna tell Big Dan what he oughtta do with that gal of his, boss? Maybe I'd better bring up another rifle and a pair of belt guns. Maybe you didn't know Big Dan has like as not been told you bought in and shenaniganed him outta the top cut of white cedar he'd been figurin' on for next year?"

"Big Dan?" exclaimed the topper. "You've been readin' Paul Bunyan or somethin'. It was that damned Chuck Purvis was after that last run of cedar—wait a minute, Sam? How much do you know about this last cedar run?"

Whiskey Sam stared at Bob Owen. "And me thinkin' all the time you was a smart galoot. Maybe I got you pegged wrong. It was Chuck Purvis had me run out of Big Dan's camp. I didn't want a bellyful of lead, and Big Dan wouldn't believe they's a damn thing wrong with his woods boss. Not with his gal fixin' up to marry Purvis."

"You've had too much redeye, Sam. Go somewhere and sleep it off. Why, that Peggy's not more than sixteen and Purvis saw forty years ago."

Whiskey Sam clamped his mouth shut suddenly. He shook his head. Then he was muttering.

"What's that, Sam?"

"Go on an' stick your neck out, boss. See Big Dan. He don't stand for any rough stuff around his camp, so Purvis will lay off. But I'm lookin' up a couple-a cases *muy pronto.*"

"You don't need any more, Sam."

"I ain't talkin' about redeye, boss. I know where there's some dynamite."

Whiskey Sam whirled, staggered some, but hit it on a run up through the trees.

"Was that whiskey talk or what? Dynamite?"

Bob Owen could only guess that Whiskey Sam was too well loaded as he started cleaning up his room. He didn't have much time, and if nothing else, he felt he owed Big Dan an explanation of that mistaken spanking he had started.

He thought Whiskey Sam had taken too much to stay awake long. Bob Owen would have had some real worry if he had known that Whiskey Sam had headed for the cave where they kept their stump blowing dynamite.

Except for a few bruises, Bob Owen was a fairly good looking redhead as he walked directly through the center of Big Dan Bailey's camp. He heard a few muttered oaths, but that was all. Big Dan would fire any man who started a ruckus inside his Wash Creek outfit.

On the outside Big Dan's cabin was rough, split-slab pine. Bob Owen had his first shock when Big Dan, heavy, roundish red face smiling, received him as if he were a friendly neighbor who dropped in every night. The surprise came as his aching hand with busted knuckles was gripped by Big Dan and the giant lumberman of Wash Creek said, "Sort o' pleased to see you comin' along, Owen. I'm sure as hell sory about that cable bustin' on you an' gettin' your men."

Bob Owen nodded, but his quick eyes were ranging about a room he didn't believe could exist up here on Wash Creek. It wasn't only the tasteful touches of a woman's hand upon it, but two walls held shelves of what he made out to be the latest in both fiction and non-fiction books, by the best writers.

"Didn't think you went in much for reading, Mr. Bailey," said Bob Owen," "Do some myself, but mostly on my

tree culture hobby. I forgot to go to school when I was twelve an' run off to see the world."

"Name's Dan any time a neighbor's in my camp," replied Big Dan and his face grew redder suddenly "As for readin', it takes me a week to wade through the *Logging Gazette*. Nope. Them's the gal's books."

Bob Owen was stopped cold for the moment. Big Dan coughed and added, "Peggy tells me she an' you had some argument about them newfangled apricot trees growin' where the white cedar's bein' took out."

"Yeah—yeah, that was what—" Bob Owen wasn't quite sure how he should tell this. Big Dan was casually saying nothing about the fight bruises on the topper's freckled face.

Before he could frame his story from an apparent fresh angle, a husky voice with an inaudible laugh behind it, turned Bob Owen to an inner doorway. His mind reeled as he took in the pretty oval face and the pair of brown eyes that were liquidly warm. All of a sudden he was mentally damning all women as having been born to trickery and deceit, and himself outwitted by a girl. In her primly long skirt and a snowy lawn waist with a ruffled collar, Big Dan's girl was a slim young woman looking Bob Owen over with what would have passed for shyest modesty, if it hadn't been for the dancing devils in her eyes and his own memory that suddenly set his ears on fire.

It was lucky that Big Dan took over the running talk with his bluff heartiness. It only added to Bob Owen's awkwardness to hear it straight from Big Dan himself that—

"Reckon I'll hafta move off Wash Creek and find some cutting in the big stuff again. Serves me damn well right for overlookin' the date of that tax sale, but it should give a smart young fella like you, Bob, a big lift ahead for having the good sense to grab that top white cedar—"

SO THAT WAS why the sly Whiskey Sam had hinted that his boss wasn't half the galoot he had thought he was for not knowing what was going on. It wasn't adding any to Bob Owen's visit to think back a few hours when he had called this suddenly cultured and tempting young woman a "damn thieving brat" and, yes, he had actually got in the first lick of what he meant to be a spanking.

Then she added, "I heard about you from my father while I was still at State College in Portland. He said some of the cutters then in the big trees were fighting each other over getting the ace tree topper of Oregon. Said something about your last boss having won you onto his job in a poker game."

Bob Owen had never before been so strongly drawn to any woman. His muddled mind still couldn't make Big Dan's girl, as of tonight fit in with rowdy, tough talking, hard-eyed younker who had in every way possible egged on Chuck Purvis and his roughneck pard to beat hell out of him. Looking at this Miss Peggy Bailey's slickly coiled black hair and watching mocking eyes quietly making a fool of him, Bob Owen was suddenly aroused to hot resentment.

What the hell? Hadn't Whiskey Sam said it was in the cards for Big Dan's gal to marry up with the brutish Chuck Davis? This young woman was far from the young brat he had ticketed her, but the visiting topper still rated Chuck Purvis as old enough to be her father.

Then Bob Owen's brain stopped whirling long enough for him to get in a few quick, hard thoughts. Within seconds that came to something more than had appeared in the attempt to cripple him today and the matter of the girl playing Chuck Purvis as a possible husband.

They'd had a few drinks, and Big Dan's geniality may have been the same, but Bob Owen was looking at this from a new angle.

"There could be more than one way of losing me my white cedar," he thought. "A few days more will put the last few thousand feet of my cedar in the ponds. Come to think of it, Purvis is ahead and he has nearly all of Big Dan's last tree crop already in the three damned ponds below mine. Maybe the other cutters farther down are ready to float at any time.

"I have to get back up the creek," said Bob Owen suddenly. "I need to work some of my boys overtime after that cable accident. I came down to—well," he was beginning to stutter some. "I was wanting to prove to Miss Peggy some points about apricot trees."

Malicious devils came into the girl's eyes, and she rubbed one brown hand as if by accident along her skirt and where it around over a curving hip.

"Yes, Bob?" she said softly. "These new apricot trees have some angles in their favor."

But the red-faced topper wasn't thinking of an angle now.

Bob Owen didn't put too much faith in Big Dan's rule that kept ruckusin' out of his camp. He was alert as he shagged along the road leading toward the top dams and his own place.

There was but dim moonlight out here. The topper held to the middle of the road. Big Dan had been cordial enough. He cussed in a low voice over the mistake he had made about Peggy, but he couldn't overlook that her use of hard language earlier had been natural, and her demure attitude of the woman she had appeared to be tonight was perfect but to Bob Owen there was something about the girl that held back his impulse to yield all the way to her attractiveness.

He had stepped to one side of the road when he heard the quick, hushed voices. There was no mistaking the grating harshness of Chuck Purvis. And again Bob was hearing the tone of Big Dan's girl as she had made free play with tough camp lingo today on the hill.

The topper was able to catch but a few murmured words. But they snapped him to quick attention.

"You mean to roll 'em as soon as Pa Dan makes this week's trip to Grant's Pass?"

"It'll be the only time, Peggy," growled Chuck Purvis. "Big Dan can be told our top dam was busted accidental. Once it starts, nothin' this side of hell can stop the year's log wash all the way to Pacific Port."

Bob Owen swore silently. Peggy said, "That's damn' smart figurin', Chuck. He'd stop it if he was here, an' there'll be blue hell popping when he finds out it was you tryin' to beat him to that auction sale. So you give him the wrong date, an' then this redheaded tree topper outsmarts you."

"Like hell he did! Dammit! He was drunk an' didn't know what he was buyin' into! A'right, gimme me a kiss an' shag back 'fore Big Dan misses you."

That was all Bob Owen waited to hear.

He guessed a tricky Jezebel would take a hand against her own father if she really loved a man. How a young woman as clever and lovely as Peggy Bailey could love the coarse, crooked woods boss, Chuck Purvis, was beyond Bob Owen's understanding.

But he had seen many puzzling marriages in even his middle twenties. Men didn't make sense when it came to choosing women, and many women critters were less easy to figure out.

LITTLE, OLD Whiskey Sam wasn't curled up in his bunk where he should have been, it being now close to midnight. Bob Owen stopped trying to get the dual lives of Big Dan's girl straight in his mind. He hated himself for trying to find an excuse for her.

He might have overlooked everything but that furtive meeting with Chuck Purvis. And she had kissed him? Well, what the what did that matter? Let her go to hell in a hand basket if she wanted it that way.

The redhaired topper wasn't thinking so deeply. Come to add it all up, he had seen Big Dan's girl child for the first time less than twelve hours before when he had hauled what he had believed was a fruit stealing younker out of an apricot tree by an overall leg.

A round of the sleeping camp failed to turn up the missing old Whiskey Sam. Might as well forget him. He had been talking about getting two cases of—

The thought alone halted Bob Owen. Whiskey Sam had said dynamite, not whiskey. But the coastal Oregon brand of redeye was referred to as everything from hell-fire to

rotgut. Old Whiskey Sam must be in the woods sleeping off a knockout drunk.

Bob Owen was bone weary and aching from the day's fight, so he slept some. But when the sun was slanting in, Bob Owen was up. His mind was filled with a grim foreboding.

He cussed at himself for not having been as fast thinking as he should have been. That business about Chuck Purvis planning to break loose his top dam when Big Dan made a trip to Grant's Pass?

He had it now, and he had been damn' slow getting it. He was under a tight contract to deliver his own white cedar on what would be the only possible creek run of the year. If Big Dan's three ponds were suddenly cut loose, the system was automatically intended to carry along all of the white cedar down to Pacific Port.

"By the shades of Paul Bunyan's blue ox, I'd be stranded suddenly with two hundred thousand worth of white cedar, and it would cut the profit to nothing if it had to be loaded and hauled," thought Bob Owen.

The topper's red hair was an easy mark as he headed for two miles down the timbered hogback toward Big Dan's upper dam. He should have armed himself, but as he had told Whiskey Sam he had wanted to keep gunplay out of this.

Bob Owen's lower pond was two miles above Big Dan's first holding dam. He had a sudden glimpse of a ridge leading down that way in he brightening morning sun. He was sure he saw old Whiskey Sam at a distance, an that the rum-soaked old coot had some kind of a box under on arm and was still toting that Winchester rifle.

He would take that matter up later, he thought. He wanted a look a the day's activities in Big Dan's camp. It could be that Big Dan might pick today to ride up the range to Grant's Pass on Rogue River. And if so, that furtive conversation between Chuck Purvis and Peggy Bailey might mean sudden action.

Bob Owen halted, swearing between his tight teeth, just out of view of Big Dan's top holding dam. It wasn't usual for any man to cuss at an unexpected glimpse of some snow-white intimate garments belonging to a young woman. Some of these were strung on a rope in the creek bottom right under that top holding dam.

And down there was that same tough, overalled younker he had met up with only yesterday. At this point a fair stream of clear water flowed toward Big Dan's next holding pond some two miles below.

"It couldn't be," thought Bob Owen. "Seeing her last night, Big Dan would sure as hell have some Siwash squaw doin' the washing. But it's Peggy and that looks like Big Dan's underwear she's flailing in the creek."

More family washing was stacked nearby. But it was the forty or more roughnecks headed by Chuck Purvis that held Bob Owen's attention. The men were lined up, and two roughnecks had been held up on top of the high dam above the girl. It was evident that they had started out to open up the floodgates of the big pond.

Half a million tons of water filled with white cedar logs would have been tough on the Big Dan Bailey family washing. Not to mention what would have happened to the strangely transformed girl calmly going ahead with the beating of the clothes as if she had no audience.

CHUCK PURVIS had a voice that would scare chipmunks a mile around.

"Dammit, Peggy! Come up outta there' I'll have one of the boys fetch along the clothes! Big Dan's halfway up the ridge toward Grant's Pass by this time, and he'll be as sore as hell when he finds out we could have left that redheaded smart son so high and dry with his logs that I'd get back—I mean Big Dan would get back the contract for delivery next year!"

That speech put Big Dan's girl right back between two ways of thinking. Had she intended to side Chuck Purvis in busting Bob Owen's contract, or had she been running a ranny

on him, making him think she was playing with him against Big Dan?

Men's voices sounded closer, near the creek bed below Bob Owen.

"That little heller's been washin' them clothes over and over again since sunup, an' there ain't ary man, includin' Big Chuck who dare bring her out. Big Dan would kill the roughneck that put a finger on that gal."

Bob Owen grinned then. He could see the impudent defiance on Peggy Bailey's pretty face as she looked up at Chuck Purvis.

But the topper's keen eyes drifted to the ridge and top of his own dam. He didn't appear more than half size at that distance, but there was no mistaking the scrawny figure of Whiskey Dan. Bob Owen could just make out that he was toting a box under one arm and that he still clung to the Winchester rifle:

"Now what the devil and all is Sam up to?" thought the topper. "He's so tipsy he'll fall off that dam. That box? Making off with a case of whiskey, maybe—" then his mind jumped—"dynamite?"

Surely the rum-soaked Whiskey Sam hadn't in mind the blasting of their top dam?

Then, too late, Bob Owen saw the case placed in the middle of their dam and Whiskey Sam was running with his peculiar shambling gait back toward the ridge.

Chuck Purvis continued cussing and yelling at Big Dan's girl, for the washing of the family clothes went calmly ahead. Bob Owen knew that not even Chuck Purvis would dare to touch the girl to bring her out of the creek bed. He still had his men on the dam of Big Dan's top pond, but they didn't dare to touch the floodgates.

Bob Owen supposed his mind was slow. Whiskey Sam had not put a fuse to the box on their dam or the smoke would have showed. Then the topper got the idea. Smart Whiskey Sam had covered that dynamite case with explosive caps.

It was the topper's immediate impulse to shout a warning to Big Dan's girl, but he doubted if it would work. None of Big Dan's crew would touch her.

Bob Owen saw the smoke of Whiskey Sam's rifle from back on the ridge. There were two snapping reports. Then the power of a whole case of dynamite heaved downward, ripping open Bob Owen's floodgates.

Chuck Purvis and the others heard the rifle and the jarring explosion, but they were slow to understand what was happening. The Bob Owen pond and his cut white cedar were rushing down into the upper pond of Big Dan before one of the roughnecks saw the danger.

Chuck Purvis, cursing wildly, was the first to realize that he had been crossed up on his own water stealing trick by old Whiskey Sam. But the roaring blast and the thunder of water and logs drowned the bellowing voice of Purvis.

BIG DAN'S girl was turning, unable to see above the first dam, and apparently believing some trick was being worked to get her out of the creek bed. Whereupon the prettiest and stubbornest heller in the whole state of Oregon made no move other than to fasten another easily recognized two-legged garment of white to her drying line.

No doubt but that any of Big Dan's roughnecks would have risked his life to save Big Dan's girl. But they were slow thinking and the redhaired topper had the advantage of having seen the explosion. It would be but seconds before the weight of water and logs smashed out the Big Dan dam. Bob Owen's white cedar had started for the Pacific port, but the life of Big Dan's girl depended upon but one thing, and that was the flashing speed of the redhaired topper's leathery, climbing legs.

The water and logs had not yet hit the nearby dam when Bob Owen reached Peggy Bailey and snatched her into his arms.

He might have been prepared for it. She hadn't yet realized what was

happening. She clawed at the topper's face and burned his ears momentarily with the roughest camp lingo she could make heard.

That ended when the water hit them and Bob Owen clung to the girl, fighting his way toward the shore. The end of a log hit his head and dizzied him, but the topper made it to wading water. Big Dan's girl by this time looked about the same as the day before, with her face scratched and her black hair tumbling.

Suddenly Bob Owen realized that Chuck Purvis and some of his roughnecks were shagging it away. Others stood back watching. It was then that Big Dan's girl again had all of the hardness out of her warm, brown eyes. Her voice was low, resigned. It was like her to ignore what she had done to save the robber's white cedar.

"I suppose, Mr. Bob Owen, you're hell bent on finishing that spanking," she said.

"Maybe this'll be worse, Peggy," he said quietly, then he held his hard mouth on her curving lips until her hands went around his neck.

High up on the ridge smart old Whiskey Sam dug a new bottle out of a case he had hidden. The redeye gurgled into his dry throat. Old Whiskey Sam had spent the whole night without a single drink so that his rifle would be steady enough to hit that case of dynamite.

THE END

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Satan Baits A Death Trap

By DAN KIRBY and A. KENNETH BRENT

Wade Ramage wondered if he'd made a fatal mistake —was it true that these stocky, double-barreled Hereford were unable to take care of themselves on the open range? Or might there be another reason for his losing so many?

WADE RAMAGE reined his blue roan stallion to a halt near the railroad track bed and stared down at the three dead cows sprawled shapelessly on both sides of the steel rails. A strained whiteness appeared around his mouth as he fought to stem the tide of anger and hopelessness rising within him. Here was the same old story of cattle killed by the night train from Amnesty. All of them bore his Cross Triangle brand and, as always, some of his best animals were among those dead.

Ramage swung his horse around and moved slowly down the track. In a shallow gulch about one hundred yards away he found a big Hereford bull lying where it had been tossed lifeless by the train's cowcatcher. Ramage dismounted and walked over to where the animal lay. He saw immediately that it was a prize three

year old he had been giving special care in the hope that it might interest the neighboring valley ranchers in his blooded stock.

His eyes swept the range around the track, picking out the piles of bleached bones and occasional disasters to his dwindling herd. His mouth pulled down in bitter line and the old doubt seeped into his mind. Was it true that the stocky, barrel-bodied Herefords were unable to fend for themselves on the open range? Were they soft and slow-witted and fit only for the fenced pastures of the east? Mace Gordon, owner of the big Frying Pan spread, claimed that was the case and he'd convinced the other ranchers of it too. Mace was a longhorn man.

Wade turned the roan and pointed him toward his ranch house two miles to the north. It would be bitter news to his wife Ellen. They had started this blooded Hereford spread figuring on selling cattle to their neighbors to grade up their stock. But the other ranchers were cool toward the Herefords. They couldn't invest high prices in critters that hadn't sense enough to move out of the way of a charging locomotive, they said. Longhorns were wary and strong on range savvy and didn't need fences, they pointed out. And even if one did get hit, which was seldom, it was no big loss.

Wade rode wearily into the ranch yard and nodded at Rang Ortez, his Mexican man of all work who was mending the corral that held his best breeding bull. He slipped the saddle off the roan and hung it on the top rail of the corral.

"Four more killed last night, Rang," he said. "We lost the three year old bull with them."

The lines in the old Mexican's face deepened. *"Dios,"* he said sorrowfully *"Madre de Dios!"*

WADE MADE his way to the house and found Ellen cooking breakfast on the big cast iron wood stove. She looked up quickly as he entered. He didn't say anything. He rolled a smoke and leaned against the doorjamb. There had been a time when Ellen would have smiled when Wade came into the house. But she wasn't smiling now. Ellen hadn't smiled in a long time, Wade thought dully. The first year they'd been married had been hard, but they hadn't complained because they were building something together.

But each year had grown harder instead of easier. At the end of this, the third year, they would have less then when they started. They owed for feed and they owed Rang his last four months salary. They owed the bank for the three year old bull that lay dead by the tracks. They were broke, Wade knew. Had been a long a time but wouldn't admit it.

Ellen said, "We lost more cows last night. I can tell by the look of you, Wade. How many this time?"

Wade pinched out the half-smoked cigarette, carefully saving the butt. "Three cows," he said, "three cows and the young bull."

Ellen turned to face him. Her pretty face was white and strained. "The bull," she repeated dully. She started to ask him something but stopped. She said simply, "Breakfast is ready."

They sat down to a meager meal and ate quickly without further talk. They were just finishing when the sound of a buckboard clattering into the ranch yard reached them. Wade rose abruptly and headed for the door. He knew the sound of that buckboard. He had heard it too many times of late.

Mace Gordon was dallying the reins and climbing down from the buckboard seat when Wade stepped onto the porch. Gordon was a big man and fat, but there was the look of strength and power behind his weight. He was several years older then Wade, but his easy, comfortable life hid that difference in their ages. He wore an expensive grey suit, a stiff white shirt, and a new pearl-grey Stetson.

Wade stared at him. "What do you want, Gordon?" he asked, without any greeting.

Mace Gordon walked to the porch. "Why," he said easily, "I was just passing by and thought I'd drop in an renew my offer to buy your little place, lock, stock, and barrel. Might

even raise my price four or five hundred."

Wade Ramage felt cold anger touch him. Gordon had become the biggest rancher in the valley by gobbling up one by one the little outfits around his own Rafter G. Wade's Cross Triangle was the only little spread left adjoining it, and he knew Gordon wanted it because it had valuable water and good stock on it.

Wade said flatly, "Gordon, how do you always manage to come around with your cheap propositions just after I've had a bad stock loss—like maybe you figured I'd be in a mood to sell?"

Gordon's cold blue eyes narrowed and his face turned red, but when he spoke, his voice was soft. "I don't know what you mean by that, Ramage," he said, "so I'll forget it. I thought maybe you'd changed your mind about selling, because I didn't think any man with guts would let his wife go to work to pay off his stock feed bills!"

RAMAGE took a quick step toward the big man, his fist clenched. "What the hell are you talking about, Gordon?" he snapped.

"Wade!"

Ellen's voice halted him abruptly and he wheeled to face her. She was standing tall and straight in the doorway, a look of mixed anger and determination in her hazel eyes.

"It's true, Wade," she said. "I went into town yesterday to get a load of salt, but Mister Barrow said he just couldn't let us have more credit until we paid our bill. He offered to let me work in the store until the bill was paid and I accepted, You know we've got to have feed and salt."

Wade's eyes blazed. He said, "Why didn't you tell me about this?" He jerked a hand at Mace Gordon. "How come he knows about it and I don't?"

"I was going to tell you about it, Wade," she said, "when I thought it was the best time." She looked at the big man in the grey suit. "I don't know how he knew."

Mace Gordon grinned, a smirking grin. "News like that gets around," he said. "Everyone knew Ellen married a man long on dreams and short on common sense. Reckon they didn't figure though that Ellen would have to step out and make the living. It's got folks tongue's waggin', Ramage. Me, I can't see why Ellen hangs on with yuh."

Anger and humiliation stabbed through Ramage's brain. The big ranchers grinning face swam crazily before his rage-blinded eyes. He was conscious of Ellen staring at him, her face strained and careworn. Some of his own humiliation was reflected in her eyes. He cracked then. The tension that tightened his insides like a fiddle string broke, and his fist lashed out savagely.

The blow took Mace Gordon flush in the mouth and he fell heavily, the contemptuous leer on his thick lips vanishing in a red smear of broken flesh. It was the sting of Gordon's teeth against his knuckles, and the jarring thud of the rancher's fall that cleared Ramage's head. He looked down at the big man and a cold nasseau settled heavily in his stomach.

He'd tried to avoid an open break with Mace Gordon. He knew that Gordon had been after Ellen to marry him before she chose him, and he knew that the big rancher had not completely given up even after the wedding. Still, he hadn't wanted open trouble with Gordon because a man with his back against a financial wall can get sucked under fast in a neighbor feud. But knowing that the big cowman wanted his ranch and maybe his wife, too, had been hard to take. The bitterness that had stored up inside him could not have been denied forever. And now Mace Gordon was on the ground with his mouth smashed and there would be trouble sure.

Ellen came off of the porch, her face flushed with anger. "You didn't have to do that, Wade. You're just making it harder."

Ramage looked at her bitterly. He said. "I can't take much more of this, Ellen. If its got so bad you got to hire yourself out, we better call it quits."

MACE GORDON sat up shakily, dust clinging to his new grey

suit and powdering his hair. He reached for his hat and stuck it on his head. Then he stood up and looked at Wade, his eyes bleak as a winter wind.

"I won't let you forget this, Ramage." He climbed into his buckboard and whipped out of the yard.

"He means that, Wade," Ellen said. "There won't be any pretense now. Maybe that's why you want to quit."

Wade's face colored. Ellen could needle a man when she wanted. "You know that's not so," he said. "But when a man can't make his wife a living, when she has to go out and walk the streets askin' for work so she can pay his debts, that's hard, Ellen. I won't let you do it."

"You're deliberately making it sound bad, Wade," Ellen said. "Mister Burrow offered me a job and I took it. That's all. I believe in this ranch and what we're trying to do just as much as you do, but we haven't even been able to buy enough salt for the licks for a year now. I've got to work the same as you to make it as success. You must be able to see that."

Ramage felt the tension leave him suddenly. Ellen was right, of course. She always was on matters like this. But there was little consolation in that thought. The sense of failure went deeply into him.

He said, "All right, Ellen."

"I'll have to stay in town while I'm working, Wade," she told him. "I wouldn't be able to make the trip to and from town every day."

"I'll drive you in in the morning," he said. He did not look at her.

The sun was bright and the day hot as they drove into Amnesty's dusty main street the following morning. Ramage reined the wagon team to a halt in front of Jeth Barrow's feed store. He helped Ellen from the wagon but did not go into the store with her.

"I'm going to talk to a man while I'm here," he sid. "I'll see you before I leave."

He turned to leave just as a man came out of the feed store. It was Mace Gordon and his thick lips were still puffed and cut. He looked at Ellen entering the store, and then he shifted his eyes to Ramage. A sardonic grin, hardly more than a grimace, twisted his face but he said nothing. He stepped into the seat of a big wagon loaded heavily with white block salt and pulled out in a cloud of dust.

Ramage stood looking after Gordon for almost a minute before he finally crossed the street to the building which bore the sign "Cattleman's Bank of Amnesty". He had not told Ellen that he was going to try to borrow more money, because he knew she would object. But if he could get a loan, just a small one, he could pay Jeth Barrow his feed bill and take Ellen back to the ranch with him.

CLAY MEYERS, The bank president, listened patiently while Ramage asked for the load and outlined how he hoped to pay it back soon. But when he finished talking, Meyers shook his head.

"I'm sorry, Wade," he said. "Your stock losses have been too heavy lately for further risk. The board of directors decided that at a meeting last night."

Ramage asked bleakly, "How come the board of directors was talking about me yesterday? I hadn't asked for any load then."

Clay Meyers reddened. "Why I don't know, Wade," he said. "I believe Mace Gordon brought it up. He's a member, you know."

Ramage nodded. He knew. He left Clay Meyer's office quickly and went back out to the street. He climbed into his wagon and left town quickly.

He did not stop to see Ellen.

* * *

Wade's thoughts were bitter and they rode him hard on the trip home. It worried him to know that powerful Mace Gordon had now come out square against him. It hurt to know that Ellen was keeping books in the musty, floor littered feed store and boarding at the dismal ramshackle, hotel when she ought to be keeping her own home—a home that should

(Continued On Page 86)

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(Continued From Page 84)

have some of the luxuries she deserved. A home like Mace Gordon could give her.

He swung the buckboard into the yard and unharnessed the team. He went inside the house and it seemed filled with a hollow emptiness without Ellen there. He sat a cold pot of coffee on the stove and rinsed out a cup with a dipper of water. He was just pouring the coffee into his cup when he heard the sound of horses' hoofs and the jingle of a bridle chain. He went to the door.

A big, stoop shouldered man was sliding out of the saddle. He looked at Ramage and nodded. "Howdy, Wade," he said. "Heard about your hard luck last n i g h t. Figured I'd drop over to see if I could lend you a hand."

The man was Josh Windrow who owned a little spread ten miles to the east. "Light down, Josh," Wade said. "Ain't much you can do. I just lost three good heifers and a bull, that's all."

Josh shook his h e a d. "Beats all how you lose so many critters on them railroads tracks. G u e s s Mace Gordon was right when he said Herefords weren't built for open range country." He looked at W a d e thoughtfully. "I heard about Ellen, Wade. I got to admire her spunk, but I know how you feel. If there's anything I can do—I still got some credit at the feed store and I put up some hay last summer."

Wade's mouth tightened. "No thanks, Josh. I ain't come to livin' off my neighbors—not yet anyway. Besides, I hear Gordon slipped in under you on that Cheyenne Agency beef contract. You ain't in no shape to give me nothing. Thanks, anyway, Josh."

JOSH Windrow grinned ruefully. "I ain't got much to stand on, all right. Losin' that contract sorta' knocked the props out from under me. Dammit, Wade, the agency keeps hollerin' for better beef, but there's just so much you can do with longhorns. If those critters of yours had any range sense they'd cross out pretty good with longhorns. Us ranchers

been talkin' about buyin' some of your bulls and puttin' them in service with our cows, but we can't pay three-four hundred for a bull that ain't got no more sense than to let a locomotive catch him flatfooted."

Wade shook his head. "Josh," he said earnestly, "I was raised with longhorns. I know them. I know Herefords, too. As far as havin' range savvy, I'm not at all satisfied that's got everything to do with my cows gettin' killed on those tracks."

Josh shrugged and got back in the saddle. "All I know, Wade, is that I ain't lost many longhorns on the tracks. Neither has the rest of the outfits. You been losin' cattle steadily. Looks like the only safe way to raise Herefords is to fence 'em in. That takes money most of us ain't got. But I sure wish you luck!"

Wade watched as the cattleman disappear down the trail then turned back into the house. He felt some better after the man's brief visit. It was good to know that at least the ranchers were beginning to recognize the need of grading up their native beef stock. They were willing to be shown that his Herefords could do it for them, but they had to be convinced that Herefords could live and take care of themselves under open range conditions. To prove that was his job. It was a fair proposition. Wade crossed the room and took down the sixgun hanging on a peg in the wall. He buckled it around his waist and went outside.

His rider, Rang, came galloping up on a sweat-covered claybank gelding. The little Mexican's face was creased with worry. He swung down and faced Wade. "Two more head we lost last night, Senor Wade," he said.

Wade's face paled. He said, "The tracks?" It was more of an answer than a question.

Rang nodded, his eyes harrassed under the brim of his big hat. "Always it is the same."

Ramage shook his head. "I can't figure it. We push the herd back three or four miles from the tracks and they still drift up to them every evening. The only answer is night herding, Rang. Keep them pushed back." He looked at the Mexican. "I

(Continued On Page 88)

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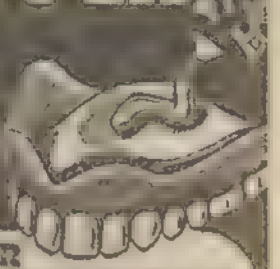

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owe you back wages, Rang, and I can't rightly ask you to work twenty-four hours a day, but that's the only chance right now. Stay with the herd, camp with it day and night. I'll relieve you tomorrow."

Rang grinned. "What is money? One can only spend it. I will stick to these cattle as does the Texas tick."

HE GOT SOME grub together for Rang and watched the little Mexican ride off toward the range, and then he went back into the house. He thought again how empty the place seemed without Ellen, and the thought left him bitter. He picked up some tools and headed for the stock breeding pen which had needed to be repaired for a long time. It would help some to keep busy. He worked hard but he couldn't keep his mind on it, and once he even sliced into his thumb with a saw when he was thinking about Ellen.

Ramage spent a restless night, sleeping only fitfully, and warmed over cold coffee again for his breakfast the next morning. He worked on the stock pen until mid-afternoon and then loaded some supplies in the buckboard and headed for the range to give Rang a break on watching the herd. He reached the spot where he expected to find the cattle, but there were only a few head grazing idly. Rang wasn't in sight. Ramage touched the lines to the team and drove with increased speed toward the railroad tracks.

He saw the hot sun reflecting off of the bright steel rails only an instant before he saw Rang. But the Mexican was not standing or riding. He was stretched out on the grey alkali earth, his eyes staring up at the sun. His sombrero string was around his throat, but the hat was crumpled under him. There was a bullet hole in Rang Ortez's forehead.

Ramage sprung from the buckboard, a sudden sickness gripping at his stomach. He knelt down beside Rang, but he knew even before he touched him that he had been dead for hours. Ramage climbed to his feet and stood there motionless as a

(Continued on Page 90)

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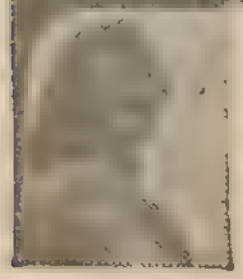

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(Continued From Page 88)

cold deadly hate replaced the sickness inside of him. Rang had been murdered without a chance. The little Mexican didn't even carry a gun.

Ramage lifted Rang gently and placed him in the bed of the buckboard. He noticed as he climbed back onto the seat and took the reins that a dead cow lay near the railroad tracks, but he did not stop to look at it. He swung the buckboard around and headed for town driving fast. His face was set in grim, hard lines.

* * *

It was an hour later that he wheeled into town and pulled up in front of Joe Carson's undertaking establishment. Ramage stepped stiffly out of the buckboard and made his way into the sheriff's office across the street.

Sheriff Wes Simms looked up as Ramage entered. He was a heavy, big-shouldered man with a rep for keeping peace. He said, "What's up, Wade. You look like death in the foothills."

Ramage stood just inside the door. He said shortly, "My rider, Rang, is outside. He's dead, Wes. Shot through the head."

WORRY lines crinkled around the sheriff's eyes. He rose and pushed past Wade into the street. Ramage followed him to the buckboard. The sheriff threw back the blanket that covered Rang's body. He pursed his lips and looked at the body a long moment. Rang's hands were clenched in a death grip. His eyes were wide and unseeing in a death-pallored face.

"Who did it, Wade?" The sheriff's voice was somber.

Ramages' lips tightened. "I can't answer that, Wes. Not and back it up."

The sheriff eyed him queerly. "I know what you mean, Wade." He straightened the body in the buckboard. He looked at the wound in the dead man's head. Then he pried open the stiffly clenched hands. Gray powder spilled from them. The sheriff grunted. "Alkali dust."

(Continued On Page 92)

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REAL WESTERN

(Continued From Page 90)

Ramage stared at the tiny mound of gray dirt. He took a pinch of it in his fingers and rubbed it between them. A stinging pain flared up in the raw cut on his thumb. A cold chill swept over Ramage. He raised the thumb to his lips and rubbed his tongue gingerly over it.

"Not dust, Wes. *Salt.*" Ramage's voice was bleak, tight with the cold, killing anger that gripped him.

The sheriff looked puzzled. "Salt. Well I'll be damned."

But Ramage was already walking stiffly toward the feed store down the street. He saw Mace Gordon standing there beside one of his big wagons and it was loaded with blocks of white salt. Ramage came to the big man and faced him squarely.

"Gordon," he said, "you or one of gun hands killed Rang Ortez last night."

Mace Gordon paled. He said, "You've gone out of your mind, Ramage."

"Maybe." Wade's voice was flat and deadly. "Or maybe I'm just beginning to see things clear. Maybe I'm just beginning to see how you've been powdering salt and packing it into the dirt between the railroad ties where it cuts across my land. The alkali dirt out there is about the same color and it wouldn't be noticed unless a man was looking for it. Maybe that's why my cows have been wandering down to the tracks and getting killed. And maybe Rang caught you packing in more salt last night when he was out with the herd, and you had to kill him."

Mace Gordon's face was a pasty grey. "You'd better not say things you can't prove, Ramage," he said.

"I think I can be proved," Wade said. "Everybody knows you've been after my range for a long time. And I reckon when Sheriff Simms searches your place he'll find where you've been powdering your salt. How're you gonna explain buying a load of salt day before yesterday and another one today. Nobody uses that much of the stuff."

Gordon took a half step backward. "You're crazy!" he whispered hoarsely.

SATAN BAITS A DEATH TRAP

Wade's eyes swept the big man. Wade said, "You can't deal with the devil without getting his brand. Look down at your feet. There's powdered salt in the cuffs of those fancy pants you're wearing. You been salting your pants lately, Gordon?"

The big man said through clenched teeth, "You've figured it all out, haven't you, Ramage? You're smart. Too smart to live."

MACE GORDON'S next move was swift. The coat of his grey suit fell back and a gun appeared in his hand. He swung it up hip high and his finger tightened on the trigger. But Ramage was ready. He threw himself behind the partial concealment of the salt-loaded wagon bed just as the gun flashed red in the gathering dusk.

Gordon fired again and Ramage felt wood splinters and salt pellets splay into his face as the bullet clipped the end of the wagon. Ramage drew his own gun then and stepped into the open. Mace Gordon made a big target standing there. Ramage triggered once, twice, three times in split second succssion.

Each slug drove Gordon back a step as it pounded home. The big man's gun slipped from his hand. He swayed for a moment like a great uprooted tree before he crashed to the ground. He did not move.

Sheriff Wes Simms came running up. "I saw the whole thing, Ramage," he yelled. "He drew on you first. But what the hell made him do it?"

Wade Ramage turned away and headed into the feed store. "I'll tell you, Wes," he said wearily. "I'll tell you in just a minute."

Right now he had to see Ellen. He had to tell her that things were going to be a lot easier on their little spread from now on.

THE END

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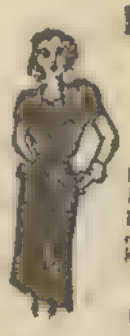

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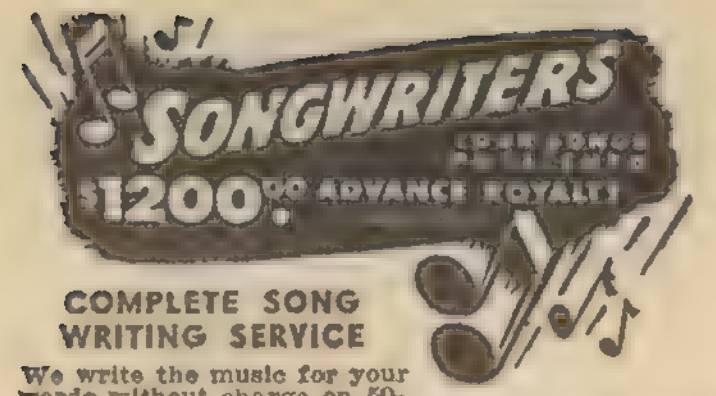

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CALL OF THE CARDS

by Rex Whitechurch

(Author of "The Pine Box")

Jack Gorman believed in nothing but Lady Luck!

IT WAS hot in the Red Fox Saloon but it was below zero outside. It was a good whiskey-drinking day. The corpulent dummy stoves were scarlet and covered the big room with a comfortable heat. Jack Gorman never touched likker; he hadn't gotten to the top by consuming forty rod red-eye to brace himself for the climb. Round after round he had crawled up the ladder—the ladder made of cards. Even now, as he stood at the door of his office, Jack Gorman saw the cards upon which he had walked to success. They were like a magic carpet.

The sleek, black-haired proprietor of Haytown's biggest saloon and dancehall, brushed imaginary specks of dust from his coat. It was a long, black, broadcloth coat, the kind professional gamblers wore. The line of dark mustache on his thin upper lip was another earmark of his trade. He was a handsome man, swarthy, slender and immaculate; his elongated eyes were cold grey and glistened.

"They've never let me down," he muttered, lighting a cigar and holding the lucifer between long, pale fingers. "Daisy said they were fickle and would let me down when I counted on them most. But it was she who did the letting-down. Jealous of the cards—" He chuckled, wondering why she had come back to Haytown. No doubt she figgured on getting him to return to her. Women sometimes got funny ideas.

He drained a bottle of white soda and was pleased because it satisfied his thirst —all the thirst he had. He'd leave the stronger stuff to others. Lifting his eyes to the gilt-trimmed mirror behind the bar, Gorman appraised the scene in the room at his back.

At a table on the left of the bat wing doors sat four greasy sodbusters in rough red woollen shirts. He studied their faces and knew they were bent upon risking what they had slaved to get for the future. But the cards would never do for them what they had done for Jack Gorman—not in this world. And tonight they were going to do even more.

Tonight he planned the biggest games of the year and he'd win as usual.

CALL OF THE CARDS

The abrupt sound of clanking spurs brought Gorman down out of the clouds. A cowboy stood there regarding him out of smoke-blue eyes. He wore a heavy woolen coat that was embellished with ice and snow. He had a square granite face, betred right at this moment. His blond hair curled around his ears. They were big, generous ears.

"Daisy sent me to see you, Jack," the puncher said. "It won't take but a minute. She's got a funny idea you ought to come and see her. I reckon it's because of the big games you've got scheduled for tonight with Steamboat Jim Malott. She said cards was your mistress and that you can't never be married again to nothing else."

Jack Gorman lowered his grey gaze to the floor. Stern lines began to move around his wide mouth. "Have a drink, Charley," he said amiably. "I don't guess there's any reason why we should have it in for each other."

Charley Lorris was Daisy's lover. He had been her lover while she was living with Gorman, but the gambler had never considered it Charley's fault. Then she'd dropped Charley, too, and had fled to Saint Joe from Haytown, to live with her mother. The latter had a big interest in a gold mine, but she had disowned Daisy for marrying him. Lucky at cards, unlucky in love. It was an old saying and sound.

"No hard feelings on my part," the puncher said. "This is a cold day and I came here to get drunk. I dunno why Daisy came back to Haytown, 'less it was to take you away from the cards. I done told her, however, it would take a lot of winning to get the job done. When she heard you and Steamboat Malott were meeting for the showdown, she nearly went crazy; she says you'll lose everything you've got."

STEAMBOAT Jim Malott, the itinerant card sharp who followed the boomtowns, was a threat to any gambler he met. Clever, a master magician of the pasteboards his card manipulation was something to behold. Dodge City, Hayes, Abilene, Liberal, Saint Joe, they all knew him. Not a mining camp or cowtown had missed hearing of Steamboat Jim Malott.

Short, with a prominent belly, always clad in grey tailored clothes, a high grey hat and a bright red necktie on a ten dollar white linen shirt, the little fat man was as colorful as any character Jack Gorman had ever met in the west. He virtually walked on gold. The gold he had won with the cards.

Steamboat had always said, "They love me. Cards? Sure. They're all I've got.

(Continued On Page 96)

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REAL WESTERN

(Continued From Page 95)

They're my sons and my daughters and they won't let their old man down for nobody. I'll see you in December, Gorman. The sky will be the limit—all gold. I won't play for nothing but gold in the jackpot. You'll be hearing from me."

He would keep his word. He was coming to Haytown, Kansas, to see what right Jack Gorman had to be called the King of the Cards.

The saloonman shrugged and came quickly back to the present. The barroom was crowded with men who had come in out of the storm. They had heard of ther impending meeting of the two great gamblers. Cowboys and farmers mingled at the coffin-black bar.

"You'd better go out and see Daisy," Charley Lorris said, taking his fourth straight whiskey. "She'll be looking for you."

"I don't think I'll go." Gorman shrugged and turned back to the bar. He stood there a moment, then walked stolidly back to his office. He shut the door, went in and sat down at his desk. Nope. There wasn't any use of Daisy trying to lure him away from the cards. He'd never forsake the cards for her. She had let him down; they hadn't. The cards would never let him down.

He unfastened the money belt from around his waist and put it in the safe. It was heavy with gold. He'd turned all his cash into gold to meet the requirements of Steamboat Jim Malott. No—he wouldn't go out in the storm to see her. What was the use? They understood each other.

He sat there a long time, smoking and listening to the snow rattle on the window panes. There'd never been a time when he'd ever thought of abandoning the cards for a woman. True, he had been lonely, but he had never seen the woman who could be faithful. Cards were jealous of women and women were jealous of cards. You failed at one or the other.

A little bead of sweat broke out on his forehead and curled down his broad face. The decision to leave it to the cards was against his better judgment, but he couldn't see any other way out. If he didn't go, and anything happened to her he'd blame himself. If the cards told him what to do, then that would end it. There would be no recurrence of qualms over a decision he had made alone.

Jack Gorman opened a drawer in his desk and produced a brand new deck of playing cards. "I'll ask them," he said, his face taut and gleaming with sweat. "They don't lie." Reluctantly he began to shuffle them on the desk.

The queen said *Go*, the jack *No*. The

queen of diamonds was the first face card he turned up. A dim smile touched his lips; the cards were giving her a break. He donned his high silk hat and opened the door.

CURSING the bitterness of the night he passed through the saloon toward the street. He saw Charley Lorris sprawled out at a deal table, dead drunk, a pool of spilled likker dripping off onto the floor. He sauntered on past the four card players near the batwings. He pushed the door open and the storm screamed at him—snow and ice and arctic wind. He knew that in thirty minutes the Saint Joe stage was due and Steamboat would be on the Concord—Steamboat and his gold.

He hurried his stride. He had to lunge against the elements. Snow was like tiny bullets hitting him in the face. He kept forging ahead, unmindful of the stinging pellets. His heels thudded on the boardwalk. The gilding coal oil lamps reached out and touched his face tenderly and showed his grim, taut expression. He passed the blacksmith shop. Now he was out where there wasn't a single falsefront to break the cruel wind.

A cabin suddenly loomed like it was drawn with chalk on a blackboard.

She was waiting for him, coy, blonde as pretty as any flower he had ever seen. She wore a black gown that had a thousand sequins on it. Her shapely lips were bewitching and irresistible. She clung to him. He was reminded of how he'd picked her up and put her in his dancehall when she'd lost her money playing poker at one of his tables.

"Please give up cards, Jack," she said plaintively, pulling him close. "Then we can be happy. You've got enough to keep us in comfort. If you don't let go of them, they'll let you down. Please, Jack, while there's time, listen to me. Mother has forgiven you because I told her how well you had done. She wants us to come and live with her."

He pushed her gently away from him. "I can see there is no use, Daisy. You're still the insanely jealous woman—you're jealous of the cards. We would never get along. Why—the cards are your friends, too. They tried to give you a break, which is more than you've done for them. The cards sent me here. I wasn't going to come, but the cards said yes; they wanted to be fair. I guess it was better to find out you hadn't changed and couldn't be honest as the cards have been. No—they'll never let me down. They're the best friends I've got."

He could still feel the warm moisture of her beseeching lips when he left her and hurried back to the Red Fox, the house of cards. Steamboat Malott would be there waiting for him. The stage had already arrived.

THE STORM roared down the wide main street of the little trail town; snow came against him in blinding, whirling gusts. There was no sign of anything moving but the snow the wind was driving into whirlpools ahead. The white-chalk-and-blackboard night cloyed around him and the flakes were cold, wet fingers making traceries on his face. His ears were getting numb when he reached the blacksmith shop. Wagon wheels had made deep black ruts up the middle of the road and he followed these.

A young man in love with two women. One of them had deserted him, but the other—his mistress, had served him well. The cards were fair. They had sent him to Daisy to be square and not to cheat her. But she had tried to cheat them....

No—he would never, never desert the cards. They had given him everything he owned; they had never let him down. He'd gambled from a shoestring to the biggest saloon and dancehall in Haytown.

He plodded on, following one of the deep black tracks in the snow. The town ahead was like a Christmas postcard, the lamps burning in the windows were welcoming beacons that warmed his heart. Then—he stopped suddenly—

A horse neighed and plunged into sight and the rider threw himself from the saddle. He came through the blizzard, with mincing steps, toward the gambler. Jack Gorman heard the crunch of snow and tore a button loose getting the small gun out of his pocket. He crouched over. The wind and ice roared against him. The white avalanche drove him backward. The gun jerked angrily in his fist. A bullet ripped his jaw open. Another slug chopped away the lobe of his left ear. The loud racket of their guns was lost in the blizzard that shrieked and catapulted against them. Again and again Gorman squeezed trigger and watched the spurts of flame. Then, just as the bullet smashed his collarbone and speared through his chest, he saw his antagonist topple down and lie still in the drifting snow.

"Well," he said, "I guess I made an awful mistake. I should've seen him there by the blacksmith shop. But he didn't get the money belt—"

Blood gurgled in his throat. The snow fell like cards and whitened him. The storm moaned and covered him with a cold shroud and it didn't seem that he had ever existed. His beloved kings and queens and jacks laughed hollowly like they always laugh at a loser.

The queen of diamonds laughed the loudest.

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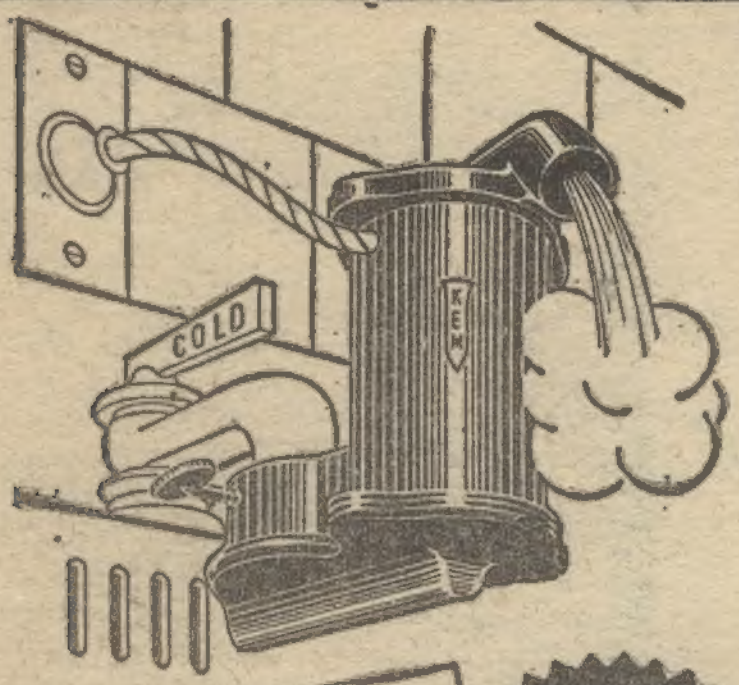

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